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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZ

OCTOBER 1989
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CLARK HOWARD
Crowded Lives

MARY HIGGINS CLARK
Milk Run

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(see page 105)

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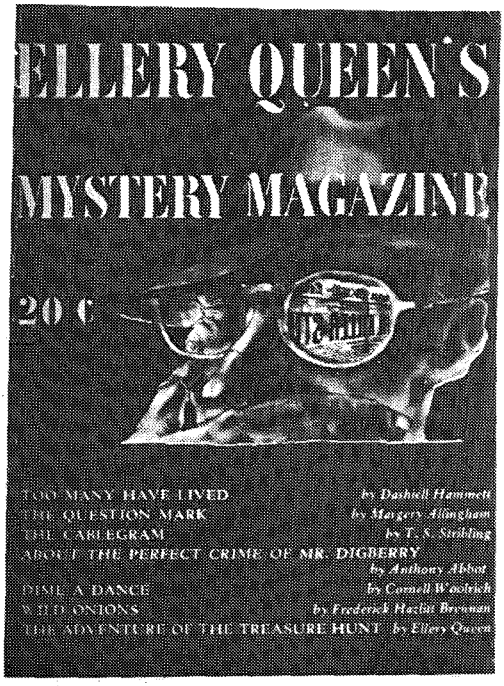

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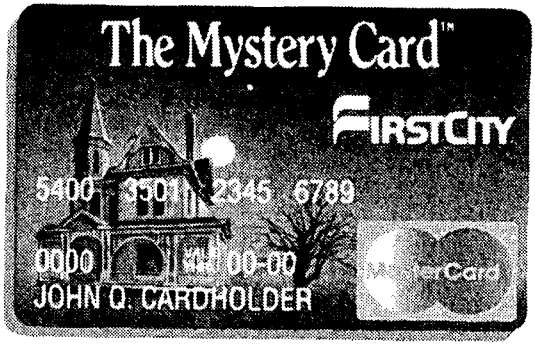

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On our cover is
MARY HIGGINS CLARK

Cover Photograph by Peter Papadopolous

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

On the way down to the boiler room in the service elevator, Simms asked the maintenance man, "What's with this guy Wallace, anyway? He comes on like a concentration-camp guard."

"Ex-cop," Hosey said. "Takes his job real serious." After a beat to think it over, he added, "I guess I ought to tell you—Max don't much like the halfway house sending guys to work here. You're the third one they sent. The other two didn't last long. Max, he don't give a guy much slack. He particularly don't like nobody messing around with none of the young women that lives here." Hosey shrugged. "I ain't telling you what to do, understand—but you asked and I thought you should know."

Clark Howard's first short story since you voted a story of his your favorite EQMM story of the year for the third time—"Animals" (1985), "Scalplock" (1986), and, last year, "The Dakar Run" . . .

CROWDED LIVES

by CLARK HOWARD

George Simms stood across the street on Sixth Avenue and looked at the old Algiers Hotel. It did not appear markedly different than he remembered it from years earlier. There were a couple of vagrants loitering outside and a few scruffy kids playing where previously a uniformed doorman would never have allowed, but the vagrants and the kids were there because the neighborhood had gone so far downhill. The hotel itself, twelve stories tall, standing formidably behind its marqueed entrance, was outwardly unchanged, as if its dignity, its style, might still be intact. George Simms knew, however, that inside would be a different story entirely.

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When there was a lull in traffic, Simms crossed the street and tried five of the eight entry doors before he found one unlocked. Walking quietly across a marble floor, he stopped at the edge of the foyer and looked at the lobby. The Italian-marble columns were still there, and some leaded windows high up in the wall that faced an inner courtyard, but that was all that remained unscathed. Most of the mahogany wainscoting and pilasters was warped, scratched, scarred, or broken off. The velvet tapestries were dusty and torn. The carpeting was worn, ripped, curling up at the corners. A lot of the original lobby furniture was still there, overstuffed chairs and divans on which stylishly dressed women had once taken afternoon tea. The women sitting on them now, George Simms observed, wore sweatshirts and Levis, and drank their coffee out of cardboard cups. Their children, perhaps two dozen of them—like their mothers, of various colors—were playing on the worn carpet, hiding behind the torn tapestries, or scribbling on the mahogany with stubs of crayon. Off in the corners sat a few elderly persons who watched them silently.

Across the foyer, a stout, uniformed woman sat at an incongruous green-metal desk under a sign that read: ALL VISITORS MUST SIGN IN AND OUT. She had been watching Simms since he had walked in and finally said, "Can I help you?"

Simms went over to her. "I'm supposed to go to work for Charlie Hosey."

"You from the halfway house?"

"Yes."

"Okay, you got to see Max Wallace first. He's head of security on the premises. See the grand ballroom over there—those big doors that are chained shut? Go down the hall next to them—you'll see his office."

Simms threaded his way through the playing children, past the women whose conversation ceased as he went by, past the big ballroom doors which did have a length of chain connected to their brass handles by a padlock, and down a hall to a door that had ASSISTANT MANAGER lettered into its mahogany surface and a plastic sign reading *Security* thumbtacked above it.

A black man dressed in starched, creased khaki, Max Wallace was thick but not fat, built like a fire hydrant, with eyes that riveted wherever they focused. As soon as Simms entered, they riveted on him. "Let's see your assignment paper," he said without preliminary.

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Simms hesitated. "The job counselor at the halfway house said I was supposed to give that to Charlie Hosey."

"I don't care what the job counselor at the halfway house told you, bud. *I'm* in charge of these premises, not him. I want to see your assignment paper—now." He held out a thick hand. Simms gave him the folded paper he wanted. Wallace's laser eyes flicked over it. "General maintenance man," he read, and grunted contemptuously. He tossed the paper back to Simms. "What'd you serve time for, Simms?" he asked, leaning forward, his words almost a challenge.

"You're not allowed to ask me that," Simms told him.

Wallace's eyes flashed anger, but just for an instant. He sat back. "They tell you that at the *halfway house*?" he asked.

"Yes." Simms wished he had a drink of water.

"Then I guess you also know that I can't ask where you did your time, or even how much time you did—that right?"

"Yes. Right."

"Well, since I'm not allowed to know anything about *you*, I'm going to tell you a few things about me. First of all, understand one thing: I'm in charge of every*thing* and every*body* inside these premises. The Algiers is a city welfare hotel. There are nearly three hundred indigent families living here, many of them just women with young children." Wallace tilted his head with a coyness surprising for his size. "I guess you been away from women for quite a spell, haven't you?"

Simms didn't say anything. Wallace's eyes narrowed. "Couldn't be that you were away for rape, could it, Simms? I mean, it would be just like those halfway-house fools to put a rapist in a building full of women to try to prove he's been re-ha-bil-i-tated. Is that it, Simms? You a rapo?"

"I told you, you're not allowed to—"

"I heard you the first time." Wallace pointed a threatening finger. "Every woman in this building is under my protection, Simms. I catch you out of line with any of them, you even look down one of their blouses when they bend over, and I'll have your ass back in the slammer so quick you'll think you never got out. Understand me?"

"I understand," Simms said quietly. He was relieved when Wallace looked away long enough to pick up the phone and dial two digits.

"Charlie, this is Max," he said. "Come to my office and get your new helper." When he hung up, he sat far back in his swivel chair,

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the springs squeaking with his weight, and carefully unwrapped a large black cigar that could have been designed with him in mind. Lighting it with an old-fashioned flip-top Zippo, he released several puffs of pungent smoke into the close little office. As he removed the cigar from his teeth, he actually smiled.

"Maybe I misjudged you, Simms," he said almost pleasantly. "Maybe you're not a rapo, after all." His smile, there for mere seconds, vanished and his voice turned harsh again. "Maybe you're a child molester. A pervert. Is that what you are, Simms?"

George Simms didn't have to worry about answering that one, because at that moment Charlie Hosey walked in.

"I can really use you," Hosey said as he showed Simms around the hotel. He was an older, short, balding man with a vague whiskey smell about him. "It ain't bad keeping up with the big stuff—the boiler, the hot-water heaters, the electrical system. It's the little stuff that runs me ragged. The minor plumbing repairs, jammed locks, hotplates shorted out, lighting fixtures that don't work. You can handle all that kinda stuff, can't you?"

"Sure," Simms said. "Those are the same problems I used to take care of in the cellhouse. Except for jammed locks, that is—I wasn't allowed to mess with locks."

"I guess not," Hosey said.

"Did you come here through the halfway house, too?" Simms asked.

"Me? No. I used to work here when the Algiers was a *real* hotel. I was maintenance superintendent when the place closed down. After that, I went to St. Luke's Hospital for a few years. Then when I seen in the paper where the city was gonna lease the Algiers as a welfare hotel, I went and seen about coming back. They was glad to get me. Keeping this place going is like working in a secondhand tire shop—it's patch, patch, patch all the time."

They paused at the chained doors. "That's the Moroccan Ballroom," Hosey said. "The Duke and Duchess of Windsor used to throw parties in there. I seen 'em. It's got picnic tables in it now—the Help for the Homeless people come in twice a day and serve free meals. Over here—" the little man led Simms across the lobby to a pair of locked leather-padded doors "—is the Casablanca Club. It used to be a real ritzy nightclub. All the big show people used to perform in there: Jolson, Helen Morgan, Blossom Seeley and Bennie Fields,

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Ruth Etting. I seen 'em." He sighed wistfully. "Yeah, this place used to be something."

They rode a service elevator, which Hosey had to unlock, down to the boiler room in the basement. On the way down, Simms asked, "What's with this guy Wallace, anyway? He comes on like a concentration-camp guard."

"Ex-cop," Hosey said. "Takes his job real serious." After a beat to think it over, he added, "I guess I ought to tell you—Max don't much like the halfway house sending guys to work here. You're the third one they sent. The other two didn't last long. Max, he don't give a guy much slack. He particularly don't like nobody messing around with one of the young women that lives here." Hosey shrugged. "I ain't telling you what to do, understand—but you asked and I thought you should know."

"Thanks," said Simms. "I appreciate it."

Off the big boiler room was the maintenance office: a badly scarred wooden desk littered with papers and miscellaneous junk in front of a padded chair that had a patch repaired with black electrical tape. A wooden straight chair stood in front of the desk, an old metal file-cabinet next to it. A pinup-girl calendar from a plumbing-supply company was thumbtacked to the wall. At the back of the office was a curtained doorway leading to a small storeroom. The curtain wasn't closed all the way and Simms caught a glimpse of a cot in the room.

"Here's where I list all the minor repairs to be done," Hosey said, showing Simms a clipboard hanging on a nail. "Every day you just go down the list and do as many of 'em as you can. I ain't gonna dog you as long as you do a reasonable amount of work. I know alls you're getting is minimum wage for now. But if you work out and want a permanent job when you're released from the halfway house, we can talk about it."

"I'll do a good job for you, Mr. Hosey," Simms told him.

"Just call me Charlie," said the little man.

A week later, Simms was sitting on the fire stairs at the end of the seventh-floor corridor having a smoke and drinking coffee from a small thermos he'd bought. His toolbelt and the clipboard of job orders lay on the step next to him. He had been sitting there for nearly an hour when the door to Room 704 opened and a little Puerto Rican girl, five or six years old, came out into the corridor to play. Pretty, clay-colored, with raven hair, she had on jeans and a sweater

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and carried a doll that was missing a hand. Sitting on the worn carpet with her back to the wall, she propped up her knees, sat the doll on them, and began to braid the doll's hair.

Simms watched her for a couple of minutes, then leaned forward a little and spoke to her. "Hello." He said it very quietly so as not to frighten her.

She looked at him but didn't speak back.

"My name's George," he said. "I work here." He showed her the toolbelt. "See?" The little girl looked, then turned her attention back to the doll. "That sure is a pretty doll," Simms said. "But what happened to her hand?"

"She was in a accident," the child said, not looking at him.

"That's too bad," Simms said consolingly. "But she's a very lucky little doll to have you to take care of her." From the pocket of his denim workshirt, he took a pack of chewing gum. Slowly unwrapping a stick, he put it in his mouth. The little girl was watching him. "Would you like some gum?" he asked. She looked back at her doll without answering. "It's fruit-flavored," he said. "Here—" he held out a stick "—have some."

The girl rose and walked over to him. She stood before the stairs he was sitting on and Simms gave her the gum and watched as she unwrapped it and put it in her mouth. As she began to chew, she smiled.

"See, I told you it was good," Simms said. A lock of hair had fallen over her forehead and Simms reached out and brushed it back. "Now, I told you my name, but if we're going to be friends you've got to tell me yours."

Just then a woman came out of 704 and strode urgently over to them. "Debbie, what are you doing?" she said irritably.

Simms frowned. Debbie? *Debbie?* What the hell kind of name was that for a Puerto Rican kid?

The woman took the girl by one arm. "You know you're supposed to stay right by the door. And not talk to strangers."

"It's okay," Simms said, smiling. "I work here."

"I don't give a damn where you work!" the woman snapped. She was pretty—an older version of the child, except that her eyes had no innocence left in them. "What have you got in your mouth?" she demanded of Debbie. "Spit it out," she ordered, holding her hand under the child's mouth. "Now get back in the room!" As the little girl hurried away, the woman turned her anger on Simms. "What

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the hell do you think you're doing, giving gum to my kid? Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"My name's George," Simms said. "I work here." He held up the toolbelt. "I fix things—"

"Yeah. Well, if I ever catch you giving anything to my kid again I'm gonna fix *you*." The woman stuck the wad of gum on the handle of his screwdriver. "Stay away from my kid!"

She stalked away.

A few days later, Simms went down to the maintenance office for some new work orders and Hosey was not at his desk. Simms pulled the curtain aside and looked into the storeroom for him. He wasn't there, either. It was the first time Simms had seen the storeroom except for an occasional glimpse when the curtains were left open an inch or so. Now he looked around curiously. The cot he'd seen his first day was of the ordinary folding variety, with a blue-striped mattress and a couple of grey blankets that had ST. LUKE HOSPITAL printed on them. An upturned wooden crate served as a nightstand. On it was a cheap little lamp, an ashtray full of cigarette butts, and a glossy porno magazine with a nude woman in bondage on the cover. Standing on the floor next to the cot was an almost empty Jim Beam bottle. A few of Hosey's extra clothes hung from nails in the wall.

The phone on Hosey's desk rang. Simms closed the curtain and answered it. "Maintenance."

"Where's Charlie?"

Simms recognized Max Wallace's voice. "I don't know, I just walked in."

"Find him," Wallace ordered crisply. "Then the two of you get up to my office—*fast*."

Simms found Hosey over in a section of the basement that had been converted into a laundry room for the welfare tenants. He had the drum out of a clothes dryer and was resetting its axle. Simms told him about Wallace's call and Hosey put aside his work. "Did he say what it was about?" he asked.

"No," said Simms. "He just sounded mad—as usual."

When they got to the security office, Max was with a little black girl of eight or nine and her mother. Wallace glanced at Hosey, glared at Simms, and knelt in front of the girl. "Sweetheart, I want you to look at these two men and tell me if it was either one of them

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that scared you." The child hesitated and Wallace gently patted her head. "It's all right. Come on now, take a look for me."

The little girl looked at Hosey and Simms, frowned, seemed to ponder, and finally said, "I'm not sure. It was so dark—" Her voice broke and she whimpered a little.

Wallace gestured to her mother. "I'll talk to her again later. Meantime, try to go on with her normal routine as much as you can. Don't avoid the subject, but don't talk about it like it was the end of the world, either. Understand?"

"Yes, all right," the mother replied in a strained voice. She took her daughter and left.

Wallace sat behind his desk and studied Hosey and Simms with cold eyes. "That little girl," he said evenly, "was on her way down the stairs to go to school this morning when a man accosted her on the landing between the lobby and two. She says the man tried to kiss her. The light on the landing was out, but she saw that he was a white man and she says he had a funny smell."

"Well, why pick on us?" Hosey said indignantly.

"You're white and you're in the building," Wallace said.

"For Christ's sake, there's probably two or three dozen white guys living in the place," Hosey argued. "And there's boy friends that sneak in and spend the night, there's johns that some of these women go out and pick up for extra money. You got no right to single us out, Wallace."

"Nobody said I was singling you out. I always check the obvious first." The security man reached for his phone. "You can go," he told them.

His eyes lingered on Simms until he was out the door.

That afternoon, Simms was helping Hosey rehang one of the lobby doors that the kids had misaligned by swinging on it. "Maybe I shouldn't have got so hot at Max," the little man mused. "He's just trying to do his job. It ain't an easy one, either—there's lots going on in this place that shouldn't be going on. Prostitution, drug sales, stolen property being sold—"

"I guess you never expected to see those kind of things in the Algiers," Simms sympathized.

"Not stuff like that, never," Hosey declared. " 'Course, in any big city hotel you're gonna get your share of illegal goings-on. Hell, I used to see Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano come in here regular to have a drink in the Oasis Bar—there's no telling what kind of

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crooked business they was talking about. And one time we found out there was a high-price call-girl ring operating out of what used to be the penthouse suite. It was supposed to be rented to this wealthy Texas dame and her four daughters—well, they wasn't her daughters at all, if you know what I mean."

Hosey grinned. "Funniest thing that ever happened was the time some teller over at Chase Manhattan got conned by a blonde who was a dead ringer for Lana Turner. She was supposed to run away with him, see, after he embezzled a bundle of dough, but what she really did was run away *from* him—*with* the dough. The cops arrested him right here in the hotel, sitting on the bed, suitcase all packed, waiting for her to come back." While Hosey was talking, Simms noticed Debbie's mother go into the coffee shop across the street from the hotel. Debbie wasn't with her. "She got caught later on," Hosey said.

"Who?"

"The blonde that looked like Lana Turner. She got caught down in Florida somewheres. Only had about ten thousand dollars left. Claimed the bank teller only gave her twenty. The bank said a hundred thousand was stole. If you ask me, the bankers probably took the difference." Hosey used an electric drill on a long extension cord to screw in the last door-hinge. "Well, that about does it. I wish there was some way to keep the kids from swinging on it, but I guess there ain't. We'll be fixing it again in a month."

"Okay if I take a few minutes off, Charlie?" Simms said. He could see Debbie's mother sitting by the coffee-shop window with a cup in front of her.

"Sure, take a break," Hosey said, winding up his extension cord.

Simms trotted over to the coffee shop and went to the table where Debbie's mother sat. "Can I talk to you a minute?" he asked.

She looked up from a folded section of classified ads. "What about?"

Simms sat across from her. "I just wanted to tell you I was sorry for what happened about the gum. I guess I wasn't thinking. I mean, it was just a natural thing to offer the kid a stick of gum. It never occurred to me how it might look."

"Just stay away from her, okay?" the woman said firmly.

"Yeah, sure I will," Simms assured. "I just wanted you to know I didn't mean nothing by it. I was only trying to be friendly."

"Okay, but don't let it happen again." She sighed wearily. "That

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place over there—" she bobbed her chin at the hotel "—is a sewer. A mother with a kid can't be too careful."

"I know, I realize that now. I'm sorry, okay?" He took a pack of gum from his shirt pocket. "How about you?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. "*You* want a stick of gum?"

She half smiled in spite of herself. "Why not?" She took a stick and put it in her mouth.

"Looking for a job?" Simms asked, nodding at the classifieds.

"Yeah. Soon's I find one, I'm getting out of that dump over there."

"Listen," he told her, "I go to this place at night, it's kind of a community center, and sometimes I hear about job openings over there. If I hear of anything I think might interest you, I'll let you know."

Her eyes flashed suspicion. "What do you think that'll get you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't sleep around, man."

"Hey," Simms said righteously, "I'm just trying to be a nice guy. Lighten up a little."

She sighed again. "Well, you just never know. Seems like everybody's out to get something."

"I know. It's hard to tell who's being straight with you sometimes." Simms drummed his fingers on the tabletop. After a moment, he asked, "So where's Debbie?"

"She's in daycare until three."

"How'd you happen to give her a name like Debbie?" he asked. "I mean, that's kind of an all-American girl-next-door name."

"Maybe I'd like her to grow up to be an all-American girl-next-door. Anything wrong with that?"

"No, not at all. No offense intended," he said quickly. "Hey, speaking of names, what's yours?"

"Lupe Mercado," she told him.

"I'm George Simms," he said. He extended his hand and, after first hesitating, she shook it. "If you ever need anything fixed in your room," he said, "just let me know. You don't have to fill out a form and wait your turn, I'll do it for you right away."

Lupe shrugged. "Okay." There was a tiny pinch at the top of her nose.

"I better be getting back," Simms said, rising. "Thanks for not being mad at me any more."

Outside, as he waited to cross the street, he looked back and saw her watching him suspiciously. He smiled and waved. She still

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doesn't trust me all that much, he thought. But for his purposes, that was okay. All he needed was a little trust.

For a week, Simms watched Lupe Mercado come and go. Her routine never varied. First thing in the morning she took Debbie to daycare, then she spent the rest of the morning job-hunting. At noon she was usually back at the hotel for the free meal served by Help for the Homeless. After lunch she'd sit in the lobby or go across to the coffee shop and read the classifieds again to see if there was anything she missed that morning. Sometimes Simms would see her using one of the pay phones in the lobby to call about jobs. Then, just before three, she'd leave to get her daughter from daycare.

Now and then Simms would speak to her in passing or wave to her across the lobby, but he didn't intrude on what she was doing or in any way act as if he was presuming a friendship. All he wanted to do was keep her aware of him until he was ready.

He picked Thursday as the day. Thursday: late in the week when people were tired, not as alert, laboring toward the weekend. Simms had already selected the boiler-room door that led to the alley as the way by which he'd leave the hotel. He knew he'd have to move fast—Max Wallace would be after him very quickly.

At three-thirty, Simms was on the seventh floor when Lupe Mercado got off the elevator with Debbie and came down the corridor to 704. Simms pretended to be in a hurry.

"I was hoping I'd run into you," he said in a rush of words. "I only got a second—there's a bad leaky pipe in the basement I got to tend to." Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out a slip of paper. "This lady's got a dress shop down in the Village. She wants somebody to work in her stockroom—says she'll train somebody with no experience, says it's good pay plus a discount on clothes. Give her a call as soon as you can, the job might still be open." Pressing the slip of paper into her hand, he hurried down the corridor to the fire stairs. He made sure his footsteps sounded loudly as he ran down to six, and halfway down to five. Then he abruptly turned and crept quietly back up to seven. Standing just around the corner from the corridor, he heard Lupe speaking to her daughter.

"I'll be at the phone in the lobby—just for a few minutes. You stay inside until I get back. Don't play in the hall."

Hearing a door close, Simms peered around the corner. Lupe Mercado was hurrying toward the elevator. He waited until she got on

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the elevator, then walked quickly to Room 704. When he knocked, Debbie opened the door on a chain.

"Debbie," he said easily, "call your mother to the door—I gave her the wrong phone number."

"She went downstairs."

"Oh. Well, let me in and I'll wait for her. I have to give her the right number."

He took a pack of gum from his pocket and put a stick in his mouth. "It's okay," he assured her. "Your mother and I are friends. You know I'm helping her find a job." Unwrapping another stick of gum, he held it through the opening.

Debbie hesitated. Then she took it. Simms unfolded several work orders he had stuck under his toolbelt. "While I'm waiting, I want to check something in your bathroom that needs fixing." He added just a hint of firmness to his voice. "Open the door now, Debbie, so I can get to work."

Debbie took the chain off and opened the door. When Simms got inside, he closed and locked the door behind him.

In the lobby, Lupe hung up the telephone and stared at the slip of paper in confusion. It was the number of a dress shop in the Village, all right, but the sales clerk Lupe had talked to knew nothing of any stockroom job that was open. The clerk had called the manager to the phone, but the manager knew nothing about it, either. And the owner of the store was out of town on a buying trip.

Puzzled, Lupe started back toward the elevators. Charlie Hosey was near the elevator bank, repairing a drinking fountain. Max Wallace had just walked up to him. "Where's Simms?" she heard Wallace ask the maintenance man.

"He went up to seven to do something," Hosey said. "He ain't come down yet."

Lupe stopped and stared at them. "Oh, my God!" she said.

"What's the matter?" Wallace asked.

Without answering, Lupe ran toward the elevators.

"Simms," Wallace said tightly. "I knew it!" He ran after Lupe.

Hosey ran after both of them.

In the bathroom of 704, Debbie was sitting on the edge of the tub, watching Simms in fascination. He had emptied the medicine cabinet of all its contents, piling them in the sink. Then, with a power screw-remover, he had unscrewed four three-inch wood screws that

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held the metal medicine cabinet into the wall studs on each side of it. With a small chisel, he'd pried loose the top, bottom, and both sides of the cabinet and taken it out of the wall. Then he had stuck his arm far down into the opening between the walls and pulled up a pillowcase with *Algiers Hotel* embroidered across the hem. "Thanks, kid," he said, tucking the pillowcase under one arm. "Tell your mother to call Maintenance to have this put back in."

He started for the door and Debbie followed him. At the door, he paused and gave her the rest of the pack of gum. "Your mother's right, you know," he told her. "You really shouldn't talk to strangers or take gum or anything. Promise me you won't do it again."

Smiling shyly, Debbie said, "I promise, George."

Simms opened the door and stepped into the corridor. Max Wallace, just hurrying up, put a gun in his face. "Move a muscle and you're gone," he said coldly.

Simms froze. Lupe Mercado rushed past him to gather Debbie into her arms. "My baby! What did he do to you?" she cried.

"I didn't do anything to her—" Simms started to protest.

"Shut up!" Wallace ordered.

Peering past Wallace's shoulder, Charlie Hosey's face brightened. "Now I remember you! You're the bank teller! I always thought you looked familiar—"

Wallace frowned. "That Chase Manhattan embezzler you told me about?"

"That's the one," said Hosey. "The one who hooked up with the Lana Turner lookalike."

Wallace snatched the pillowcase from Simms and looked inside it. "Well, I'll be damned," he whispered.

"It must have been hidden in that room all these years," Hosey said. "Eighty thousand dollars."

Lupe stared at the bundles of currency in the pillowcase, then turned her eyes incredulously to Simms, her lips parted in stunned disbelief. Wallace put handcuffs on Simms and started leading him away.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lupe asked, following them down the hall, indignation rising. "We could have shared it! We could have both got out of this sewer! Why didn't you trust me enough to tell me?"

"Me trust *you?*" Simms said. "You didn't even trust me enough to give your kid a stick of gum!"

In the middle of the corridor, Wallace pushed Simms onto the

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elevator. "You could have *tried!*" Lupe said. Then more softly she added, "*I* could have tried—"

"Well, it's too late now," Simms said flatly as the elevator door closed them off from each other for the last time.

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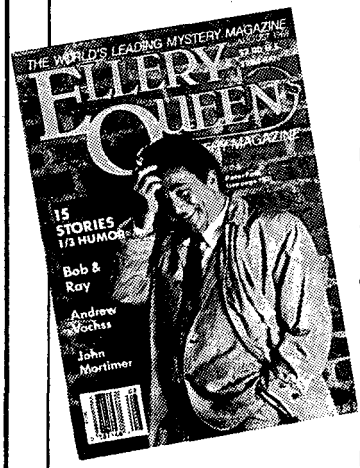

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It came to the weather man where he'd seen Mike Carmichael's face before. In the newspapers. It was reported that he controlled the north side of the city. Or was it the south side? Actually, the weather man thought, it probably didn't really matter except to the people living there . . .

THE WEATHER MAN

by JACK RITCHIE

I made a notation. "You say the marriage ceremony is scheduled to take place at ten o'clock tomorrow morning?"

Juliette Carmichael nodded. "I know that's rather short notice, but I just heard about you yesterday. I'm getting married at St. Leo's and I'd like it to be a nice sunshiny day. The reception will be in the afternoon."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I really can't guarantee receptions. That is a field unto itself. My province is only the marriage ceremony."

She accepted the limitation. "Well, *mainly* I'm concerned about the wedding. I wouldn't want it to rain."

I consulted several of my charts and then ran a finger down a logarithm column.

"It's truly amazing how you're able to predict the weather," Miss Carmichael said.

I agreed. "It is a gift which I try to use for the benefit of mankind." I multiplied 22,826 by 4,426, pondered over my slide rule, and then did a little long division. "I'm afraid that there's a slight inharmoniousness in the Fourth Quadrant of Spencer's Mobile Infraction."

"Oh, dear. You mean it's going to rain?"

I smiled reassuringly. "No. I positively guarantee that there will be no rain during the marriage ceremony itself. However—" I tapped the sheet of paper containing my calculations "—there *is* a chance of some cloudiness."

She showed considerable relief. "Well, what's a few clouds, anyway? Just as long as it doesn't rain. That's a bad way to start off a marriage, you know."

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"Who's the lucky man?" I asked routinely.

"Terrance Renfro," she said, and wrote out a check for one hundred dollars.

When she left, I went back to my crossword puzzle.

It is my profession, my trade, my bag, to predict the weather—particularly for weddings—and I do this with an accuracy of over ninety-six percent.

How am I able to achieve this near-miracle? Really, it's quite simple.

I always predict fair weather. Always. Or to be more precise, I predict that it will not actually *rain*.

To begin with, according to weather statistics for this part of the Midwest, there are—on an average—only six days in the month of June which one might describe as "rainy."

Therefore, by predicting fair weather, my chances of being correct are immediately twenty-four out of thirty—or eighty percent.

But I go further.

I predict *only* that it will not rain "during the ceremony," which almost always takes place between the hours of eight and twelve in the morning.

And since it does not rain twenty-four hours a day, even on "rainy" days, a bit more mathematics will show that the chances that there will be rain during any particular four-hour segment of the month come to less than four percent.

And if it does rain?

I cheerfully give my clients double their money back—which, of course, occurs less than once in twenty-five times.

I had just finished my crossword puzzle when I heard the outer door to my waiting room open and close.

I let seven or eight minutes pass—one must not appear too eager to shear the sheep—and then opened my office door.

I found a young bespectacled man who studied me earnestly.

"Are you the weather man?" he asked. "The one who predicts the weather or double their money back?"

I acknowledged that. "With ninety-six percent accuracy."

He seemed impressed. "Ninety-six percent? In my book that means there's more to it than just predicting. You must have the *gift* to make the kind of weather you want."

I laughed deprecatingly. "People *have* said that about me."

He nodded. "Nobody is right ninety-six percent of the time without

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some kind of an inside track. Right? When you want sunshine, you *get* sunshine. And when you want rain, you *get* rain." He pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "And I want rain tomorrow."

Frankly, no one had ever asked me for rain before. I was curious. "Why?"

"I'm sorry, but that's personal. I just want a nice steady soaking rain tomorrow."

It wasn't that I was unwilling to take his one hundred dollars, but the odds were overwhelming that I would just have to give him double his money back tomorrow.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I've already promised someone else sunshine. First come, first served, you know."

He fixed me with a steady eye. "I am not a person who haggles. I'll give you four thousand dollars if I get rain tomorrow."

Four thousand dollars? That did change the picture a bit.

I could take his money and leave town tonight. Four thousand made the move worth it. Besides, I'd practically milked this territory dry, anyway.

I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully. "Well, if rain is really *that* important to you, I just may be able to swing it."

He took out his checkbook and began writing. "You won't have any difficulty cashing this at the First National. I've already spoken to the people there."

When he handed me the check, I saw that his name was Terrance Renfro.

Terrance Renfro? And he wanted rain tomorrow?

I was mildly shocked. "You *want* rain on your wedding day?"

He flushed slightly. "It's sort of a tradition on my side of the family. It rained when my parents got married, and my grandparents, and my great-grandparents. I wouldn't want to break the chain. It's bad luck."

After he left, I went immediately to the bank and cashed his check. I returned to the office with the intention of gathering a few personal belongings before leaving town and found a tall, heavy-set man with hair greying at the temples waiting for me.

"Are you the weather man?" he asked.

I admitted as much and he studied me. "Do you know who I am?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," I said.

"The name is Carmichael. Mike Carmichael."

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It came to me now where I'd seen his face before. In the newspapers. It was reported that—in a subterranean fashion—he controlled the north side of this city. Or was it the south? Actually, I didn't suppose it really mattered, except to the people living there. I felt distinctly uneasy in his presence.

"What was Renfro doing here?" he demanded.

I could see no particular point or profit in denying Renfro's visit. "He wanted a weather prediction."

"And what did you give him?"

"I said it would rain tomorrow."

Further wheels meshed in my brain. Mike Carmichael? Juliette Carmichael? Was she his daughter? And Terrance Renfro his future son-in-law?

I yielded to the impulse to perspire. I had predicted fair weather for Carmichael's daughter and rainy weather for his son-in-law. The contradiction was clearly embarrassing and could possibly lead to pain.

I laughed quickly. "I predicted a sunny *morning* for your daughter and rain in the *afternoon* for your son-in-law-to-be."

He regarded me skeptically. "You're telling me that you can pinpoint weather like that?"

I pointed to my slide rule, my charts, and the other various window dressing. "It's all quite complicated, but an exact science."

"How much did you charge Juliette for the sunshine?"

"One hundred dollars. My usual fee."

"And Renfro?"

I hesitated a fraction of a second. "One hundred dollars, of course."

He leaned over me slightly. "I got other information. Now tell me why Renfro would pay you four thousand dollars for rainy weather?"

My throat was quite dry. "He told me he was getting married and it's a tradition in his family that it rains *sometime* on the wedding day. I promised him rain *only* for the afternoon."

Carmichael winced with disbelief. "He gave you four thousand dollars just for predicting rain?"

I dabbed at my forehead with a handkerchief. "I seem to have an unexplainable *influence* on the weather and some of my clients are so grateful for my services that they *insist* on paying me a bit more than the usual fee."

Carmichael rubbed his neck. "What Juliette sees in that dimwit, I'll never know. I got the feeling he's up to something. I'd ask him

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myself, firm-like, but he'd run to Juliette and she'd yell at me." He moved to the hall door. "But I'm keeping my eye on him. And you."

When he was gone, I hurriedly stuffed a briefcase with the things I intended to take with me and then glanced about the reception room to make certain I had left nothing of importance behind.

I frowned at the racing form lying on the magazine table. Who had left it there?

I paged through the booklet and found that it covered tomorrow's races at Sportland Park. A green ink-mark had been made beside one horse in each race.

Renfro had signed his check with green ink, hadn't he?

I studied the form again. Evidently Renfro played the favorite in each race—except for the fourth, where he picked a horse named Watercress.

Watercress had been out six times and never in the money. The form gave odds of fifty to one.

Why would Renfro pick favorites in all of the races except the fourth? Did he know something? I thought it over. Horses. Watercress. Long shot. Rain. A wet track.

Could Watercress run in the mud? *Really* run in the mud? A man could make a killing if he had inside information like that.

And Renfro was willing to part with four thousand dollars to make it rain.

The killing would have to be made off-track, of course. Any large amount of money bet on Watercress at Sportland Park would immediately bring down the odds before post time.

And off-track betting on the north side—or was it the south?—was controlled by Mike Carmichael.

But obviously Renfro wasn't telling his prospective father-in-law about the coup. That meant that Renfro was going to marry Carmichael's daughter in the morning and double-cross Carmichael in the afternoon.

I sighed at the iniquity of man and also at my inability to provide rain on command.

When I reached my apartment, I packed a suitcase and opened the door to the hall.

Carmichael stood outside. His eyes went to the suitcase. "Going somewhere?"

I cleared my throat. "I just received word that my favorite Uncle

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Mortimer in Portland passed away and I was about to attend his funeral."

Carmichael shook his head. "Let Uncle Mortimer get put away without you. Stay in your apartment until I say different."

I went back to my apartment and closed the door.

Obviously Carmichael had decided to keep an eye on me until he found out what Renfro was up to.

After an hour, I opened the door again. Carmichael was gone, but one of his representatives had taken his place. The short burly man stared me back into my apartment.

I tried again at intervals, including two and four o'clock in the morning. The faces changed, but the principle of guarding me remained the same.

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear. Juliette would have a perfect day for her wedding.

I phoned the corner restaurant and had breakfast sent up, but I found I couldn't eat it.

At eleven, as I was mixing my third bourbon and soda, I glanced out of the window. The sky had begun to darken.

At a quarter to twelve, it began to rain. A steady, soaking rain. One that could make a race track really sloppy.

I glanced at my watch and took a long drink. What time was the fourth race at Sportland Park? Probably about three.

I sat down at the phone and put in a call to Joey Evans in Peoria.

"Joey," I said, "I'd like to put five hundred on Watercress in the fourth at Sportland Park."

There was a pause while he evidently wrote that down. "Haven't heard from you in a while."

"Been traveling."

"Watercress? Looks like a dog to me. Five hundred? You never put down more than a couple of tens before."

"I know, Joey. But last night I dreamed about watercress sandwiches and then this morning when I picked up the form, there it was. Watercress in the fourth. You got to play something like that, Joey."

He could understand that. "All right. Five hundred on Watercress."

Next I dialed Ed Leonard in Madison, Weiss in Milwaukee, and Kramer in Rockford. Five hundred here, four hundred there. I spread it around, making certain, of course, that none of it was laid down

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in Carmichael territory, whichever it was. When I was through, I had four thousand bucks on the line.

I made myself another drink. Now what about Carmichael?

When Watercress came in and his bookies got hit big by Renfro, he would ask questions until he got answers.

But Renfro probably had plans to get out of town fast, safe, rich, and possibly with Carmichael's daughter.

That left me here, the patsy.

Carmichael was bound to decide that somehow Renfro and I were in on the deal together. It wasn't too hard to imagine what Carmichael would do to me.

I took courage in a few more drinks and then opened the door to the hall.

The short burly man was back.

"I've got to see Carmichael right away," I said.

He shook his head. "Carmichael's at his daughter's wedding reception. Whatever you got to say will wait."

"This is a matter of life, death, and especially money," I said. "Lots of money, and Carmichael will be doing the paying if I don't get to him in time."

It took my guard a full minute of jaw rubbing and head scratching to make up his mind. "Okay," he said finally. "Let's go."

He took me to the Westerland Hotel where Juliette Carmichael's wedding reception was being held in a packed hall on the third floor.

He caught Carmichael's eye across the room and pointed to me. Carmichael frowned, then nodded and made his way through the mob.

When he and I were alone in a small room off the main hall, he scowled. "Well?"

"I now know why your son-in-law wanted rain so damn bad," I said. I showed Carmichael the racing form and explained the entire setup.

Carmichael's face darkened. He opened the door and spoke to the burly man just outside. "Get that little bastard Renfro and bring him here."

When Renfro was escorted into the room, he didn't look at all happy, especially when he saw me.

Carmichael did the talking, and when he was through Renfro's mouth hung open.

"But, Dad," he said, "it's really nothing like that at all. Yesterday

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morning when Juliette told me she was going to this weather man, it gave me a *brilliant* idea. The weather man *guaranteed* double your money back if you didn't get the weather he predicted. I checked with the weather bureau and they said there wasn't a ghost of a chance of rain this weekend. So I went to the weather man and ordered *rain* for today. Don't you see, Dad? I knew positively it wasn't going to rain and so he'd have to give me double my money back. Eight thousand dollars."

I blinked. Was Renfro really that simple? That naive?

Carmichael waved the racing form in front of Renfro's nose. "Do you deny this is your green ink?"

Renfro frowned at the form. "I thought I forgot that in the weather man's office. I always play the favorites, except I had this dream about watercress sandwiches. But even then I only bet two dollars like I always do."

Carmichael grabbed the phone on the corner table. After a few calls, he put down the receiver. He seemed slightly incredulous. "There hasn't been any heavy betting on Watercress with anybody in my organization. Also, the fourth race at Sportland was just run and Watercress came in sixth."

Sixth? I felt distinctly ill.

Four thousand dollars down the drain on a damn horse that couldn't run in the mud—or anywhere else, for that matter.

Carmichael glared at his son-in-law. "Didn't it come to your keen mind that the weather man would probably skip out of town with your four thousand?"

Renfro frowned. "Do you think I should have checked him out with the Better Business Bureau first?"

"One other thing," Carmichael said.

"Yes, Dad?"

Carmichael pointed to the window. "It's raining."

Renfro nodded sadly. "It looks like you can't even trust the weather bureau these days."

Carmichael indicated the door. "Go join the lucky bride."

When Carmichael and I were alone again, he studied me. "Everybody's missed the real point but me. You said it would be sunny in the morning and it was. You said it would rain in the afternoon and it did."

He offered me a cigar. "Even the weather bureau with all its fancy instruments couldn't call that. So maybe you got something going

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for you. Maybe you really got the power to call the weather any way you want it, rain or shine."

He lit the cigar for me. "Suppose I got myself a real good horse that runs terrific on a wet track and I keep quiet about it? And suppose *you* provide the rain on the day I need it? Something like that could be worth twenty grand to me."

Twenty thousand? To make it rain? And suppose it really *did* rain on the day Carmichael wanted? I could parlay that twenty grand into—

I took a long drag on the cigar and smiled at Carmichael. Yes, there was still one born every minute.

DETECTIVERSE

PROTECTION AFORETHOUGHT

by DeANNE ROSEN

A timorous lady named Jane
For protection bought a Great Dane.
They went out quite late,
A thug lay in wait—
Her Dane left him writhing in pain.

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Mrs. Epstein watched the mother peeling an orange and quietly talking to the child. She might as well have been talking to the wall. The girl sat, a ball of misery, huddled on the bench as if she didn't have a soul in the world who cared for her . . .

AMANDA

by ELLIE GROSSMAN

Alarmed, Mrs. Epstein lowered her newspaper. She hadn't heard such squalling for thirty years, since Linda was a baby. What a misery *that* was, she thought, surveying the commotion. Like now, you'd think the child was being murdered.

"Please, Amanda. Control yourself."

A nice name, Mrs. Epstein mused as she watched the woman pull the girl down beside her on the bench opposite her own just inside the entrance to the park at Seventy-second and Central Park West. Immediately, Amanda turned her back, drew her feet up on the bench, wrapped her arms around her knees, and lowered her head.

Linda, God bless her, had stopped carrying on by the time she was seven. Amanda looked older, but who knew? She could be tall for her age. These days, you couldn't tell about anybody. Fifty-year-old women looked like kids.

But this child—this was no Linda. This was a heartache of a different order. Mrs. Epstein's heart went out to her *and* the mother—it had to be the mother, there was such a resemblance. Mrs. Epstein watched her peeling an orange and talking quietly to Amanda. She might as well have been talking to the wall. The child sat, a ball of misery, huddled there on the bench as if she didn't have a soul in the world who cared for her.

This was a handful. This was no passing stage, Mrs. Epstein could tell. Linda had told her about cases like this. Worse, even. This one at least could speak. Daddy, Daddy, she'd been screaming, pulling away and digging her heels into the ground as the woman was ushering her into the park. Mrs. Epstein thought it sounded like Daddy, anyway. But there were others who couldn't even say that, Linda said. Autistic, they called them. Tragic, lost babies.

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Mrs. Epstein sighed heavily and returned to her newspaper. She stared at the print. When she and Sy lived on Hillside Avenue as newlyweds there was that couple upstairs. Teddy, their baby's name was. To this day she couldn't bear to think of him, of them. That people should have such pain in their lives—

She felt someone thud down beside her. "He fixed the leak, but you think there'll come a day he'll paint over the stain?"

"Tip him, he'll paint," said Mrs. Epstein without looking up.

"Tip him," her companion repeated scornfully. "I *already* tipped him."

"Fruit," Mrs. Epstein said, looking over at Mrs. Goldman, who was settling in, crossing her legs at the ankle.

"They don't want fruit." Muriel pushed the rebuke away with her hand. She was short—her feet just touched the ground. "Oh, look who's here."

Mrs. Epstein followed her gaze across the drive where Amanda's mother was vainly urging the child to accept a section of orange. "You know them?"

Muriel nodded. "Ten-B. She moved in on Saturday. Didn't you see?"

"I went to Great Neck, remember? It was Deb—"

"Oh, sure," Muriel interrupted. "I forgot."

"So?" Mrs. Epstein prompted.

"So," Muriel complied, "she's a widow. Seven months. He was hit by a car."

"No!"

Muriel nodded solemnly. "It happens," she said sagely.

Mrs. Epstein regarded Amanda's mother. "He was young, too?"

Muriel nodded, made a vague gesture. "She's a professional woman," she offered, as if to compensate. "But the little girl took it very badly. So she gave her job up. Night and day, never lets her out of her sight." Mrs. Goldman closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun.

Mrs. Epstein was going to ask if there were any other children, but at that moment Lucille Feldman was upon them and Mrs. Epstein took up her newspaper and turned away, leaving Muriel to deal with her. Even on a good day, Mrs. Epstein had little patience for Lucille, with her blonde bob and those hats. That would have been aggravating enough, a woman her age, but everything was an argument with her. You said black, she said white. And the one

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thing Mrs. Epstein didn't need now was more agitation. Already she knew that she'd have trouble getting to sleep tonight.

The bench wasn't even in shadow when Mrs. Epstein rose.

"You going already?" Muriel asked her.

Mrs. Epstein straightened her skirt. "Linda's coming. I'm making a roast." Deliberately, she kept from looking over at the two of them. In all this time, the child hadn't moved a muscle. The mother sat reading, but Mrs. Epstein hadn't seen her turn a page yet.

Mrs. Epstein was moving away from the bench when Muriel called, "Give Linda my love."

Mrs. Epstein waved her hand and continued to walk to the corner, where she stopped, waiting for the light. She took a handkerchief from her purse and blew her nose. Then she raised her glasses and dabbed at her eyes.

It had become something of a joke over the years in the family. "Ma, don't watch," Linda would tease. "This is the one where Little Ricky gets lost." And once, on their anniversary—Linda was only a toddler then—Sy had gone through the paper and snipped out every story about a missing child, a child beaten, burned, or drowned. A damaged child. A child dead. "Take a day off," he'd said.

When she turned into the building, she smelled disinfectant. The floors were shining and she could see Eddie swabbing in the rear of the lobby. His back was to her.

Cautiously, she picked her way through, trying to avoid the wettest areas. Hearing her steps, Eddie turned. He smiled and waved and, as she turned into the left bank of elevators, she stopped and showed him her palms. "Explain it to me," she said, indicating the floor. "Why always me?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Mrs. Epstein. Better you than some of the others."

"Take care, Eddie," she said. And meant it. She liked Eddie. He always had a smile, a hello. He made her feel better. For the moment.

After Linda left and she'd tidied up, Mrs. Epstein switched on the TV. It was Wednesday. Ordinarily she enjoyed *The Equalizer*. He spoke so beautifully, it was a pleasure to listen to him. But even if she had come in in the beginning tonight, all the tumult, the noise, the hollering and scritching, it wasn't for her. She turned off the set and settled for bed.

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Tucked in, she switched on the radio. The announcer was saying that during this hour there would be more great listening on "easy 93," that Vicki Carr would sing "If You Go Away," and later on we'd hear from Michael Feinstein.

Mrs. Epstein thought a bit of Sy, as she always did in bed at night, and then of Linda. She thanked God that she still had Linda and Debbie and the children. A lush instrumental of "What'll I Do?" broke her thoughts and she fought back an image of Amanda and her mother, then reminded herself of what Linda had said—that children are incredibly resilient, that no matter how severe the trauma had been Amanda was still blessed because her primary caretaker was her mother, not some stranger.

Any number of times, Linda had seen the surviving parent guide the child safely through it all. Over time, of course. "And what more could you ask?" Linda had said before she'd kissed her and left with the remains of the roast wrapped in double silver foil in a carrybag of plastic in case it dripped. "They're well off—not wanting. You wouldn't believe how poverty can aggravate things. You *said* the woman is making herself available to the child. If there's a better way of assuring the child that the mother won't abandon her like the father did—that's what she thinks, that he abandoned her—I don't know what it is."

For a while, the image kept coming to Mrs. Epstein of the two of them on the bench, the huddled child and the young mother, each of them so alone. But by the end of the hour, as Michael Feinstein was beginning "Someone To Watch Over Me," she'd taken heart. Linda was right. Things would be better in time. Things always were.

Two floors up, in the rear of the building, Amanda woke screaming. On the bureau her Snoopy lamp was bringing a cheerful glow to the room, but there was no comfort in that. Wide-eyed, unable to check her sobs, she clutched her blanket and stared at the door, waiting for it to open. It would. It always did. And Mommy would be there—

And once again Amanda would grow tired of staying in bed. She would decide to help Daddy. She would leave her room and go down the hall to the window that overlooked the back lawn—and the garage, which she could see now that the trees were bare. She would look out and see Daddy fixing the garage door, pulling it up and down, up and down—

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And the car would be there, inching forward slowly, and Daddy not hearing it—

And then, while Amanda stood watching, there would be the sudden burst of speed and Daddy shrieking and Amanda shrieking, and—moments later—Mommy rushing upstairs, shoving her driving gloves into her pocket—

And Mommy would be standing over her, as she would do now, when the door opened.

"There, there, Mandy," she would say firmly as Amanda recoiled against the headboard. "Don't worry," she would say, sitting on the bed, her face inches from Amanda's, staring into her eyes, while Amanda held her breath and stared back. "You'll never be alone, Mandy. Mommy will never, never leave you alone."

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"Please listen," Charlotte's mother said. "You must stop this foolishness of concerning yourself with certain affairs you can't change. I should know," she sniffed. "Even after my hearing was gone I held my head high. I stuck by your father, may he rest in peace, even when I knew certain things would never be different."

Another story about troubled, troubling neighbors, this one by a promising new author from Washington state . . .

THE UPSTAIRS FLAT

by ELIZABETH A. DALTON

The instant I knew the sound of thunder directly overhead wasn't an act of God but a free-for-all or worse, I sky-rocketed off the rollaway and landed smack-dab on my cast-encased foot.

While I stood writhing in pain, trying to regain my senses, Mother sat not ten feet away serenely watching the soundless black-and-white TV, completely oblivious to the racket upstairs, a vision of contentment with her silver braid swirled around her head like a halo.

I took one long deep breath, hopped over, planted myself between her and the late movie, pointed upward, and shouted, "Mother, what's that god-awful commotion?"

She looked up, smiled, and touched her hearing aid, unconcerned.

"The ceiling's caving in!"

"Oh, Charlotte," she soothed, "it's only the new tenants and their youngsters settling into the flat upstairs."

I shook my head. "Nobody's moving furniture this time of night—and that isn't the pitter-patter of little feet. Not unless the whole kit and caboodle's related to the mastodon family!"

She gave me one of her infamous know-nothing looks, waved me aside, and tuned out again. I got the message. Pretend nothing's wrong.

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After I swallowed two Excedrins and eased back into bed, I hoisted my cast back over the top of two pillows and muffled my ears with the patchwork quilt.

Perhaps she's right, I thought. Pretending would be so much easier. Where did meddling get me, anyway? Besides a fractured ankle, that is. And if I wasn't so clumsy at the art of intervention, I wouldn't be occupying Mother's lumpy rollaway, recovering from a nasty spill at the supermarket.

When I hobbled into the breakfast nook the next morning, Mother was waiting. "Charlotte, you look ghastly," she said, reaffirming my own sentiments after an earlier peek in the mirror.

"It's my ankle."

"It's the new tenants," she corrected me. "I pray, Charlotte, that you forget about the business upstairs. I know how you get once an idea weasels its way into your head. It's like your storytelling. You let ideas grow and grow until you're wild with them. You don't stop. As if the incident at the market wasn't enough, now you're zeroing in on the new people upstairs. Believe me, you're just suffering from an overworked imagination. It's purely coincidental."

"There are no coincidences," I said, poking air holes in my egg yolk with a fork, thinking how much she sounded like Uncle Emil.

Uncle Emil had picked me up at the street entrance to St. Mary's emergency room the afternoon my ankle had been X-rayed, wrapped, and set. After he buckled me into his Volvo, he glared at me over the top of his black-rimmed trifocals and said, "My God, Charlotte, look at you! You look as bad as that time when your father was still alive—"

That was old news. Father was gone. I stared straight ahead and concentrated on the present. I was in excruciating pain. What I needed now was a sympathetic ear. Instead, as we drove to the westbound expressway, Uncle Emil continued, "Only a nut, a crazy nut at that, runs interference for a lady in the supermarket after her old man's just backhanded her a good one. It could've been more than your ankle that got broken if you hadn't slipped on those grapes, you know."

I'd nodded my aching head for Uncle Emil then just like I nodded for Mother now. An acquiescent agreement to their well founded message.

"Live and let live." Mother poured a spray of hot water over the teabag in my cup. "That business upstairs is none of your concern."

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I looked down and studied the listing teabag. Its gauzelike keel heaved a final, gallant huff of strength, succumbed, and sank.

"Please listen," Mother was saying. "You must stop this foolishness of concerning yourself with certain affairs you can't change. Even after my hearing was gone I held my head high. I stuck by your father, may he rest in peace, even when I knew certain things would never be different." She puckered her thin lips a moment before continuing. "You've always been too high-strung for your own good. You must relax. Rest. Bones can't heal unless they have rest. Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"Could you? If you'd heard that poor soul crying her heart out upstairs all night—"

Mother gave me another look, turned down her hearing aid, and left the table.

I went outdoors and lay down on a dew-covered chaise. While I elevated my throbbing foot and cleansed my lungs of the stagnant air in Mother's flat, the door latch to the upstairs deck snapped open. I hauled myself out of the chaise and up on my crutches. When I'd shuffled clear of the overhead deck and was on safe footing in the communal courtyard I called out, "Hello up there!"

A young woman—pretty, but a bit on the thin side—with a toddler astraddle each hip stepped timidly to the wood railing.

"I'm Charlotte Pennington, your downstairs neighbor," I told her. "Temporarily, that is. I'm convalescing with my mother until I'm back on both feet."

"Are the children bothering you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Never. Children are my biggest audience. I'm a traveling storyteller. Usually spinning tales of my own making. Libraries, schools—wherever I'm needed. I love making up new stories and planting little seeds of wisdom in their heads. Children harvest ideas and never forget. They're intuitive.

"Your two are beautiful," I told her. The wide-eyed babies looked as if they hadn't been bathed in a week. "I wouldn't mind looking after them for you after I've conquered the stairs. I wouldn't be a reliable sitter before then. But I could give you a breather now and then while the children are napping. You could go shopping, get your hair done—"

At that the woman hugged the babies to her and quickly backed away.

I heard the door shut behind her.

Mother's face was like a stone mask when I repeated the incident

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to her. "Of course the poor girl was frightened," she said. "You, a stranger, offering to take care of her children! It was nothing more than that."

Mother and I tacitly agreed to a truce and made believe the matter upstairs didn't exist. Our days became routine. She camped in front of the television watching soaps and I lay off in the corner on the rollaway, my foot up, pretending to be absorbed in a new bestseller. But my mind was still on the situation upstairs.

And I found myself remembering how it was when Father was alive. Days upon days of bone-chilling silence, my instincts always on red alert. Waiting. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Then, as if Father were directing the script, the scene overhead warmed up again. He terrorized. She whimpered.

My heart was in my mouth and a plan began to take shape in my mind.

Despite my condition, I managed to hop away from the flat, along the hallway, and up the outside stairs like a wounded jackrabbit. I was red-faced and breathless by the time I rang the buzzer.

She cracked the door.

"May I come in?" I wheezed.

I believe it was my pitiful condition, rather than a welcoming gesture, that prompted her to open the door.

The place was a pigsty. Dirty dishes. Clutter everywhere. A three-legged chair in the corner. His doings, I suspected. And she, like the box-sized flat, looked battered, her anemic pallor and pencil-thin arms a colorful shield of bruises.

No use beating around the bush. "I know you're in trouble up here," I said boldly.

She stared at her feet. Ashamed.

"I want to help," I said kindly.

"There's nothing—"

"The police?"

She shook her head.

"There's always hope," I said. "You could leave, go to a shelter for women. They'd put you up."

"I left once—but he came around. Me and the kids are all he got."

"It's your affair, of course," I said, hating myself for sounding like Mother.

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Only when I stood like dead weight in her doorway and repeatedly swore that my intentions were truly neighborly did she finally agree to allow me to visit.

And so I did, arriving daily about noon when he wasn't at home to raise the roof. Sometimes I'd bring fresh fruit as an offering and the four of us chatted outdoors on the deck. I'd offer a strawberry to each of the babies and say, "Chew them up real good. The juice will put red in your cheeks." They squealed with delight and chewed.

Because she was a horrid housekeeper, I warned her to be careful to clean up the fruit after I left. "If you step on squashed fruit, it's like skating on a sheet of ice. I'm speaking from experience," I reminded her, looking with mock woe at my cast.

Sometimes I played indoors with the toddlers and made up little stories. Mostly about daddies who went away to the moon and how the mothers and children stayed behind and lived happily ever after.

The night before my cast was scheduled to be removed, I was awakened from a dream in which I danced barefoot across a field of daisies, free as a bird. Suddenly I found myself sitting upright and listening.

The racket upstairs was so loud it seemed as if the flat would come down on our heads. Then there was a terrible crash from the porch.

I pulled on my pink-chenille robe, limped to the patio, and flipped on the floodlight.

It was him, the man from upstairs, spreadeagled on the ground, his hands still clinging to a shattered section of the upstairs railing. His head was twisted and blood came from it. I knew he was dead.

When I saw his shoes, I wasn't surprised. She was truly a horrid housekeeper. The soles of his shoes were slick with grapes. I woke Mother before calling the police. It wouldn't do for her to awaken unprepared. Soon there would be dozens of people milling around and investigating his fall before they sent the man away to the moon.

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JudyAnn Lorenz has previously written only nonfiction for local and regional Wyoming newspapers and was once published in Western Horseman. *Several months before submitting "Full of Ugly Lies" to EQMM, she enrolled in the Writer's Digest fiction course and: "Not one of my friends," she wrote us in her cover letter, "believes a thing I tell them now." She and her husband have four children, aged twenty-six to eighteen. "We have one delightful granddaughter," she added, "Elizabeth, ten months. It was for Libby's future story-listening that I decided before she was born to develop my fictional skills. However, I seem to have gotten sidetracked on stories she won't enjoy for several years."*

Elizabeth's temporary loss is our immediate gain.

McKinsey was like other small towns—everyone knew everyone inside out and suspected even more . . .

FULL OF UGLY LIES

by JUDYANN LORENZ

Yesterday afternoon I had my very first appointment to have my hair colored. I've always used the stuff that rinses in and then rubs off blackish green on the pillowcases and my collars, but Marie, the beauty-salon operator, promised me I won't have any mess. So far, I love it—and I feel much better being seen by folks in this small farm town now, even though I'm sure they don't recognize the improvement. Now we have to wait a week to put in a permanent wave, which is already paid for. Anonymously.

A small community is funny. Everyone is real involved with one another, but no one has the true loyalty of a family. It's a lot more subtly competitive. In my own family, I'd been on the outside, taught early by the flat of Papa's hand and his hard words to keep quiet. I've mostly worked at sticking to my children's affairs and being a good wife.

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Fifteen years older, Bud was a firm husband, ready to tell me what I was supposed to do and to see that I learned it right. I was always a watcher growing up, and thirty-odd years in McKinsey hasn't changed me. I'm still a watcher on the fringes of the group. McKinsey is like other small towns—everyone knows everyone inside out and suspects even more.

When the unsigned letters started circulating, one thing was clear: the writer was a long-timer and had plenty of ammunition and suspicion to spread around. Seeing stories about yourself in black and white is stressful enough, whether they're true or false—worrying about someone else seeing them is too much. It's a hard thing to bear, having someone who's been a neighbor, probably trusted, turn sour and rattle family skeletons but refuse to be known. The strain showed on people's faces—you could see an ugly distrust settle down over the town like thick fog.

Young Grundy Callison, my husband's shirttail cousin, and his wife Marta were early targets. The letters they got spoke harshly about Marta choosing to marry Grundy instead of Virgil Donavan even though she and Virgil had lived together all through their college days. Outrageous accusations and insinuations were intended to make trouble between the Callisons.

Virgil and my husband Bud were the couple's prime suspects. Grundy and Marta made no secret that they leaned more toward blaming Bud. He'd always openly considered Grundy a knothead and the criticism didn't set well. Never one to mince words himself, Grundy was hard on Bud. I mind one special time the peace and quiet around our house was shattered by Grundy speaking his mind. I was trying to pour iced tea and not slop it while I listened to those two in hot argument out on the front porch.

"Damn your stinkin' hide, Bud McLaughlin, if you ever send me one of your trouble-makin' letters again, I'll pound you to pulp!" Grundy had gotten so worked up the air fairly throbbed with his fury.

Bud's voice showed the ongoing trouble between them was wearing him down. "Now, Grundy, don't go off half cocked," he wheezed. "You've got no proof for such."

Grundy wasn't going to be reasonable. "The hell with proof—I know what I know! And I know someday I'll figure out what you planned to gain by matching Virgil and Marta up. Just remember what I told you whenever you get a yen to work on me, remember

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it serious!" He stomped across the gravel to his pickup truck, leaving Bud watching from the porch and me from behind the curtains.

"Bud, come inside and sit down," I said. "Don't let Grundy Callison get under your skin. Come on—supper's about ready." Deep lines were carved in his worn-out face. As I urged him inside, a rush of dry, burning heat swept me and reddened my cheeks. Grundy's reaction to the letters was stronger than my wildest dreams.

He's convinced Bud did it, I thought. Making my voice chirpy cheerful, I mentioned a diversion I knew Bud would go for. "After supper let's take a drive to the pond. Maybe catch a mess of fish before sundown." Fishing always relaxed Bud.

We maintained our quiet rhythm for a few days. But then the letters started showing up at *our* place, accusing Bud of awful things, from hanky-panky in the way we met and decided to get married, to child abuse and the ruination of our only son, Max, dead these past eleven years. Some were addressed to me and full of ugly lies about the way my father had shut me out and preferred my older sisters for his wickedness. They named local folks who'd be real interested in knowing all about us. The cold fear and suspicion I'd seen warping other lives in town now threatened Bud and me. Having a secret enemy is enough to break your heart—and your home.

Bud acted as if he'd been dropped on his head, I declare he was that stunned. Despite his being the firm head of the house all these years, I was moved to try comforting and shielding him. Trouble was destroying the town. I was determined to have it seen that trouble pulled the McLaughlins together. I got the wind up about one of Bud's old flames, Peggy Corning. She was a real strong suspect in my book and, after the last letter him and me read over breakfast, I told Bud so.

"Why, this has *got* to be from Peggy Corning. She's still carrying a torch for you after thirty-eight years! She says you chose me because she threw you over! She must be losing her mind. That has to be it—Peggy's just finally gone off her rocker that you married somebody else and had kids while she dried on the vine. I've a good mind to slap this into an envelope and mail it back to her."

Bud couldn't accept what I saw so clearly. "No, no, Virginia. Whoever sent this aims to wreck us like they're doing to Grundy and Marta. This trash saying that I bought you from your dad isn't Peggy's style."

"Well, styles have been known to change over time, Bud. She

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might have picked up some bit of gossip visiting around like she does. You *were* down there in Tennessee trading with Papa, and the gossips would expect some sort of return for him to part with his favorite. I *was* Papa's pet, Bud. He never planned to have me marry and leave till you came along to deal with him. And some *would* wonder why you chose a little girl bride from there instead of your old sweetheart at home."

Bud became more upset with me than he ever had before—more than enough to hurt my feelings. "You're arguing nonsense! I'm going to see Spencer! The cops ought to be able to stop this—you just stay out of it!" Grabbing his hat, he nearly stomped his boots through the floor as he headed out. "Close that door, woman!" he roared at me as he crossed the gravel drive.

I knew he'd find Arnold Spencer, McKinsey's police chief, at the Star Cafe, drinking Molly Burke's coffee and raising her hopes. There was nothing for me to do but dry my tears and try to get presentable for my morning aerobics class. It took ten minutes of cool wet cloths to get the red out of my eyes, but I had to be careful what I let the other women see.

It was just past noon when I got home. Bud was already there. He'd fixed ham sandwiches and tomato soup and packed our fishing gear.

"We're going fishing, gal. I need to do some thinking about these damn letters, and the pond is my place to do it."

"Arnold thinks Peggy's doing it, doesn't he, Bud? She and Eva Bishop are in it together, I bet. Those two don't have anything to do all day but connive about other folks. I knew right away it was their style, no matter what you say." I was kind of gratified about my opinion and had more to say about it as I finished my soup.

"There's a couple of beers in the tackle box, we'll be back before supper" was all he answered as he cleared the table, plainly hurrying me along.

That isn't the way I like to be treated and he knew it. Tears blurred my view, but I only had my sleeve to dab at them as he hustled me out to the car.

We didn't talk any more than was absolutely necessary during the twenty-minute drive to Wheat Pond. But my curiosity was still up, so I tried again while I got my fishing pole and line ready to go.

"*Arnold* thinks Peggy wrote those letters, doesn't he?" I said.

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Bud's response surprised me beyond imagination.

"We went to see Peggy about it," he said glumly, "and come to find out she and Eva have been getting letters, too—awful ones. That makes them, Grundy, us, and God knows who else that are being hounded. You can't imagine the sick way Peggy's been attacked. She was so humiliated she wasn't going to let anybody know about the letters. I think she suspected *me* until today—maybe she still does. And Grundy still thinks I wrote them letters to him. Some devil around here sure is mean-hearted and bitter."

Plainly more worried about them and himself than me, he didn't even wait for me, but headed down the bank toward the water. I don't really know why I went after him. I only remember the start of another rush of searing heat sweeping me from head to foot, leaving a dry pain behind like after a high fever. My arms and legs ran themselves. That whippy plastic pole in my hands, I cracked it down hard across his back. From outside myself, I could hear myself scream, "Go running to Peggy, damn you! I was only ever a cash proposition between you and Papa—you never cared about me or your kids! Anybody can get your sympathy ahead of us!"

As he turned to fight me off, I saw the pain and agony in the haggard shadows of his face. Unmoved, I let him have it again and again. "Everything in them letters is true, from your badgering poor Max until it was too late for him to have a decent life to the things Peggy and Eva do on their 'quiet evenings' together. They make a decent woman sick. But I hate you the most!"

The last time I raised the pole, there wasn't anybody standing there to hit. Bud lay at the edge of the water, the waves slipping quietly around his right side. His eyes stared and garbled mumbo-jumbo came out of his twisted, slack mouth. I felt like ice. Stooping beside him, I wasn't screaming any more.

"It's a stroke, I think, Bud. I'm going to call the ambulance from Grundy's house." I didn't try to move him, didn't even touch him, just climbed the bank and drove away.

Before I got to the house, I figured they'd think it was awful peculiar if I was calm. I managed to work myself up to hysterical for Marta so that she had to make the phone call for help. She couldn't get much out of me to tell them—an emergency at Wheat Pond and Bud McLaughlin needed an ambulance was all she could report.

The emergency team was very good, but they were late. Bud never regained consciousness and he died from pneumonia a week later . . .

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No one questioned my story of how Bud tumbled down the bank and through heavy brush during the stroke, getting battered and bruised.

Our daughter Marilyn flew in from her home in Texas even though she hadn't communicated with her father for years. He had nagged her about being wrapped up in her career and staying single so bad that it came to a harsh disagreement and she quit answering his letters or taking phone calls from him.

The townspeople were most helpful while we buried their prime suspect. They brought me enormous amounts of food and visited more than they had in nearly thirty-eight years. Marilyn stayed three weeks, helping me get everything taken care of. I'm positive she was greatly comforted when I reminded her that her father had been at his favorite place on the whole earth when he got taken sick.

When she left to return to Texas and the house was quiet, I faced that I would have to direct my ways different from now on. I wasn't much put out to be rid of Bud's everyday company, except now I had no one to soak up the blame for the letters. I'd have to watch myself very carefully—those letters were a wonderful weapon and would be hard to give up.

Before I got myself a real sense of direction, Arnold Spencer came by with Grundy and Marta. At the sight of Arnold, I had a premonition of trouble, but I invited them in for coffee, anyway. Marta, no longer a quiet mouse, spoke first, with an outright accusation that I had written the letters. I tried to stall her, but I had been weakened by widowhood and finally gave in to her pressure, admitting everything. Then my mind froze—I couldn't imagine any way out. But the three of them seemed to have figured everything out.

Arnold, it turned out, had convinced the Callisons I was a mental case and it would only root out more ugly stuff to go public on me, hurting others more than punishing me. He talked them into offering me a home in one of the old tenant houses at their ranch to get me out of circulation. I saw his idea as an excellent solution for myself and I agreed.

They moved as much of my stuff as could be crowded into the tiny cottage, then had a big yard sale. Relieved to believe the letter writer was six feet under, the townspeople came, spent their money, and had a good old time. Arnold arranged for the oversized Barnes family

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to buy my house. They immediately plowed the lawn up for a garden—seven kids eat a lot of vegetables.

Once I settled in at the ranch, Arnold's helpfulness caught my attention and I recalled there had been reports of letters to one of his very special lady friends, Carmen Aguirre.

Oh, that clever boy. He'd used me to cover his trail! All because some nasty letter writer in McKinsey had scared and hurt Carmen so much and made her lonely, Frank Aguirre agreed to let his wife spend a few weeks with him at Morreton where he was finishing a construction job. What a convenient move!

A few weeks ago, Frank Aguirre passed out eight cartons of proud-father cigars to celebrate the birth of a son he'd given up getting.

Arnold received a congratulations card in the mail—anonymously, of course.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER CASE OF JUST DESSERTS

by JUDY GELLER

When Mary was forty years old,
She made a discovery bold:
Her husband was sleeping
With a girl he'd been keeping
In a cottage she thought they had sold.

Well, Mary knew Arthur loved sweets,
So she baked him some heavenly treats:
Cheesecake, brownies, and pie—
What a great way to die!
And a dead husband no longer cheats.

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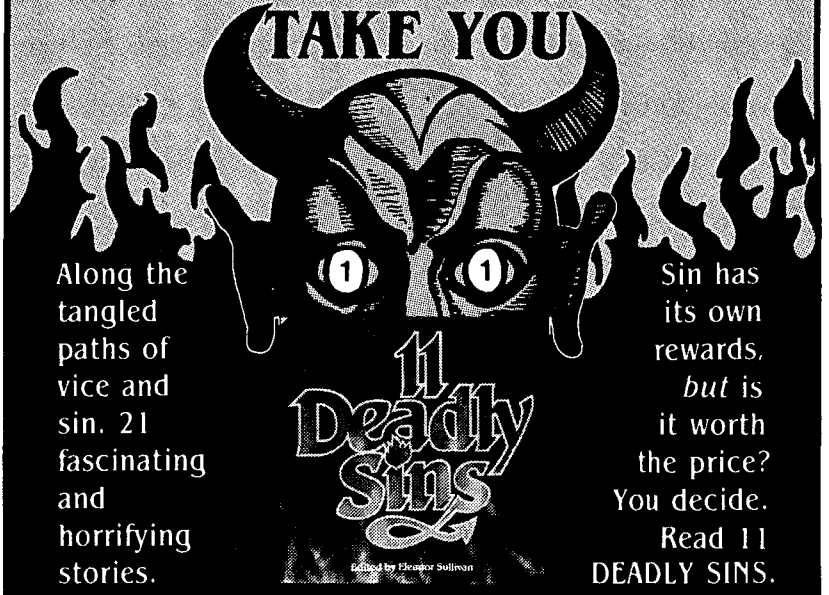

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Deana had surmised that Gordon Blickenstaff was a hermit, but she'd never imagined anything like this. His tree-shrouded cabin looked as though it could have been erected by whoever had first discovered this Northern California area, all rotting weathered planks and wavy-glass windows.

Linda O. Johnston's first published story, "Different Drummers," in the July 1988 issue won her the Robert L. Fish Award from the Mystery Writers of America for best first mystery short story of 1988. Brava, Linda. . . !

THE PERFECT PLOT

by LINDA O. JOHNSTON

Deana Devine had barely opened her car door when there he was, her literary genius. He was a beanpole of a man, whose length, height, and lack of width were emphasized by the tight denim overalls over his blue-flannel shirt. "Mr. Blickenstaff?" she asked, just to be sure, although who else could it be way out here? She'd followed implicitly the directions he'd given over the phone.

"Yes, yes. Please, Miss Devine, come out of there. I mean, come on into the house and I'll show you around."

Deana swung her long legs out of the rented sportscar onto the gravel driveway, making sure Gordon Blickenstaff had a memorable glimpse of thigh. That was not, of course, the kind of relationship she planned with this long, homely writer, but anything that could foster his cooperation was fair game.

"Miss Devine, you have no idea how excited I am that an editor of your stature has come all this way to see me," Gordon said, grabbing her hand and pistoning it so vehemently it tingled when he finally let go.

"The pleasure's all mine, Gordon," she responded, amused to see

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his narrow, rumpled face redden in self-effacing delight. "Besides, as I explained to you on the phone, it's not far out of my way—I'm expected at a conference in San Francisco the day after tomorrow." Her boss, Benny Bohrer, the publisher of New York-based Bohrer Books, would be at the conference, but they'd come to the Coast separately. He thought she was taking a couple of days' vacation. Deana hadn't wanted him to know anything about her mission to visit her new discovery. Not yet. Not when they'd disagreed so much recently on which books to publish, and even on a manuscript she'd written herself.

To top it off, her dismay that Benny had vetoed her decision to publish a perfectly delightful mystery a few months earlier had festered into fury now that the manuscript he'd rejected was a best-selling novel—another publisher's. And another editor was receiving the accolades for discovering the author.

Gordon Blickenstaff and his work were hers alone.

Extracting her briefcase from the seat beside her, she stood and stretched in the cool, pine-spiced air, for her drive along freeways to the local, tree-shaded roads had seemed exceptionally long and tiring. "What a wonderful retreat you have here," she commented, concealing her amazement that anyone could live in such squalor. She'd surmised during her phone call several days before that the man was a hermit, but she'd never imagined anything like this. Gordon's tree-shrouded cabin looked as though it could have been erected by whoever had first discovered this Northern California area, all rotting weathered planks and wavy-glass windows.

"It suits my purposes," Gordon ventured. "Low upkeep and little interruption."

It certainly was quiet. There were no highway noises—only the rustling of restless leaves, a couple of birds chirping, and a distant clatter that could have been an eager woodpecker.

Ducking to avoid the low-hanging branches of a spreading cypress, Gordon led her to one of the two dangerously decrepit chairs on the cabin's front porch and asked if she wanted any refreshment.

"Maybe later," she said, sitting. "Gordon, before we go any further, I want to tell you how much I enjoyed the manuscript of *The Perfect Plot*. As managing editor at Bohrer, I read hundreds of manuscripts a year and, frankly, I'm likely to ignore the ones from the slush pile. I mean, I can't say I'm overly impressed with what a lot of agents send me, but their offerings are generally preferable to the garbage

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so many first-time authors send. But *The Perfect Plot* is—well, I'm simply at a loss for words."

"Thank you," Gordon whispered, clearly overawed. His mouth hung slack, revealing ancient yellow teeth jacketed in gold. Deana looked away. It wouldn't do to let him think anything about him disgusted her.

She picked up the briefcase she'd rested on the filthy porch, careful to brush it off before placing it on her lap—the peach-crepe dress she wore was one of her favorites. Extracting a notebook and a black Cross pen, she prepared to take notes. "Before we discuss the possibility of Bohrer publishing *The Perfect Plot,* I have some questions to ask you."

"Anything," he said, pulling his chair around to face hers. His hands clasped in his lap looked as stringy and gnarled as the trunk of the cypress hanging over the front of the cabin.

"First, and most important, I want to confirm what you told me over the phone. Have you sent *The Perfect Plot* to any other publishing house? I mean, before sending it to Bohrer or at the same time? I'd hate to have anyone else aware of the ghoulish simplicity of the solution to the crime if we publish the book."

"Oh, no. No. I've been reading mysteries for years and my very favorite publisher is Bohrer. When I finished the book, I sent it right to you, no one else first. I was going to wait to hear from you before trying another publisher if you didn't like it."

"Wonderful. And I'm pleased you knew enough to send it to me as managing editor—I'd have hated for anyone else to have seen it first. This way, it's my discovery. Now I need to know a little about your background. Have you been writing for long?"

"No. I was a worker in the wine industry. I'm sixty, and I was going to wait till sixty-five to retire, but last year my wife Millicent decided we'd been together long enough and she divorced me. After more than thirty-five years together, she wanted out." His voice broke, and Deana shaped her lips into a sympathetic moue. Fortunately, he collected himself quickly. "Well, I decided it was time for a change, so I sold my house in St. Helena, bought this place for a song, and arranged for my pension checks to be sent to the local post office."

"So you write here. Do you have an office inside?"

"Sure. I'll show you."

Deana followed Gordon Blickenstaff about his one-room cabin, her heels clicking a cadence on the wooden floor. She was careful not

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to touch anything. The place smelled bad, a combination of burnt wood and cabbage cooked sometime in the recent past. He had quite a setup, though, in spite of being so far from civilization. Although the bathroom was an outhouse behind the cabin, he had water and electricity. His personal computer arrangement was an anomaly in a hovel that didn't even have an indoor john. He had two disk drives, a dot-matrix printer, and a shelf containing boxes carefully labeled as the drafts of *The Perfect Plot.*

After Deana expressed how impressed she was, they returned to the front porch.

"I'm certain your family must be very proud of you," she said. "Did you tell your ex-wife you were writing a book?"

"No, she didn't care. I didn't tell my kids, either."

"Oh, you have children? Have they visited you here?"

"No. One lives in L.A. and the other in Phoenix. I went to stay with both of them and the grandkids for a while before I settled down, but I didn't want to tell them why I was hiding away. If they knew it was to write, when I hadn't written a word before in my life, they'd say I was crazy. And if they said that, maybe I'd believe them and not write." He stretched his long arms down beside him and shrugged self-consciously.

"I'm delighted that didn't happen," Deana reassured him. "Bohrer Books would have lost a wonderful author before he ever got started."

"Do you think so? I mean, you really like my book?"

Deana laughed. "Would I be here otherwise?" She crossed her legs and leaned forward, watching in amusement as he tried courteously to avoid staring up her short skirt. "But how on earth did you get the idea for *The Perfect Plot?* I mean, it takes place at a writers conference and describes it all so well—new writers ostensibly trying to learn something but mostly hoping to sell their work, hungry agents and editors looking for the few good undiscovered writers. That's how I'm sure the conference I'm going to is going to be. All the others I've attended have been like that."

Blickenstaff nodded. "I went to an affair like that ten, maybe fifteen years ago. See, I always thought I'd want to write when I retired. My wife thought I was nuts, but she went along because it was in Monterey and she likes the shopping there and in Carmel, which is nearby. It was amazing to me, all the intrigue. Everyone seemed so friendly, but the place was dripping with competition. Perfect place for a crime."

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"*And* the perfect crime!" Deana gushed. "I mean, your killing off the nasty old publisher that way was simply incredible. No one could have guessed in a million years that the editor did it. In fact, I don't think the private detective could ever have figured it out if the editor hadn't made that mistake at the end. And the way the murder was *committed* was positively ingenious."

"Then you'll publish it?"

"Well, I'll have to get the publisher's okay, but that should be just a formality." It *used* to be just a formality. Any more, Benny Bohrer, with his eyes on some fallacious bottom line rather than on the publication of authentic literature, was becoming a bear to deal with. A horrible, nasty old grizzly bear—one she'd love to shoot and stuff.

"Oh, thank you—"

Gratitude radiated from the old man's glistening blue eyes, and again Deana had to look away. It was much too premature for him to shower her with gratitude.

"I'll be back in touch," she said, picking up her briefcase, "but now I have to go." It couldn't have been better if she'd plotted it herself. Gordon, continuing to be cooperative, walked her to her car.

"Oh, Gordon," she called out the window as he stood waving goodbye, "I've a light on in here—it says the trunk isn't closed. Would you check it?"

As Gordon grabbed the closed trunk-lid, Deana threw the car into reverse and smashed into him.

Watching in the rearview mirror, she ignored the astonishment on his face. After he disappeared, she rocked the vehicle back and forth a couple of times to be sure.

Thrusting aside the vision of the bloody body that had been new author Gordon Blickenstaff, she picked her way between the cypress branches and onto the front porch of the cabin. Holding a tissue over her hand, she turned the doorknob and walked in. Quickly she removed everything she could find relating to *The Perfect Plot*—drafts, computer disks, a copy of the letter to her. Then she returned to the car.

It was a rental car, of course. She'd taken it under an assumed name in Los Angeles and driven it north. Another rental car waited in the undergrowth about five miles down the road. When she reached the second car, Deana used the chemicals and rags she'd left in it to clean the first one inside and out. She transferred all of

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the materials she'd picked up from Gordon's cabin into the second car.

The only thing wrong with the perfect, untraceable murder of the publisher described in *The Perfect Plot* was the amount of time it took to set it up. But never mind. She'd get to San Francisco that afternoon and the eminently expendable publisher Benny Bohrer wouldn't arrive for another day. In the meantime, the only real chore was getting rid of the drafts and disks and the rest. But she had to be careful. She didn't want this real-life editor to make any mistakes.

DETECTIVERSE

SWEET REVENGE

by STEVEN J. SWEENEY

There was little to prove it was murder—
Almost nothing to go on, they said—
But they dusted and lifted and measured
From the balcony back to her bed,
Almost missing the small box of chocolates
That her lover'd neglected to hide
From his wife, who'd replaced a creme filling
With a smidgeon of sweet cyanide.

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Nika had only worked for Winkler a couple of months. Dr. Hazeltine had known her a good five years. The truth was, for a long time he wasn't so sure about Nika . . .

AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART

by HENRY SLESAR

Dr. Hazeltine made himself comfortable in Dr. Winkler's waiting room, but comfort wasn't a word he could associate with chrome, plastic, and foam rubber. Nearing sixty, Hazeltine preferred the overstuffed warmth of his own office to Joel's Swedish modern, but everything was image these days, and who knows? Maybe Joel Winkler's patients were reassured by contemporary furnishings and related them to the furnishings of Joel's own mind. He smiled to himself, thinking of telling this theory to Nika at dinner. She would laugh and think him clever.

Joel came out with a grin less enormous than usual. The younger doctor looked tired, his thinning hair ruffled and forming a light corona around his head. "Come in, Charlie," he said, grabbing Hazeltine's hand and elbow at the same time. "Sorry to keep you waiting. I got a hypertensive patient, the only time she feels better is when she's talking to me on the phone." He chuckled, and so did his friend.

When they were seated in Joel's office, Winkler traded his grin for a warm, spreading smile that made his homely face attractive. "So, you son of a gun," he said. "So you're really taking the plunge. And with my own nurse!"

"You can't say I rushed into it," Hazeltine said. "Eighteen years a widower, Joel, that's a long time."

"I don't understand it," Joel said, making sure the twinkle showed. "Nika's too good for you. She's younger, she's better-looking, she's smarter—"

"You know how women are," Hazeltine smiled. "They think a doctor's a good catch, even an old one like me." He took a cigarette out of his pocket but looked guilty about it. "Only the fifth one today," he said.

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"I almost fell over when Nika told me the news this morning. What was it, Charlie? Something you were thinking about for a long time, or did it just happen?"

"Oh, it was quick, all right. We were out to dinner last night and, I don't know, maybe I had one drink too many or maybe it was the candles on the table, but the next I knew—"

"You were hooked."

Hazeltine laughed. Then he looked solemnly at the cigarette in his hand and stubbed it out, blowing a long stream of smoke across Joel's desk blotter. "The truth is, Joel, for a long time I wasn't so sure about Nika."

"Sure?"

The cigarette was dead, but Hazeltine was almost tempted to light another one. He struggled with the temptation for a moment, won, and then leaned back with a sigh.

"She's only worked for you a couple of months. I've known her a good five years. You knew she was married before?"

"I heard. A couple of times, I think."

"Three," Hazeltine said. "Her first husband was Sam Cernak—do you remember him? He was a patient of mine."

"No, I don't."

"We consulted on the case. I asked you to look at his EKG and you gave me the same opinion I had."

"Sure, I remember now. The one with that extreme arrythmia."

"Nika had just come to work for me when Cernak showed up as a patient—he was a widower himself, and they got friendly. After a couple of months, he proposed and she married him. They moved out to Cleveland when Cernak's company moved. He died, I think it was, five or six months after the wedding."

"He was a poor risk," Joel said sadly. "Did you warn Nika how sick the man was?"

"She knew," Hazeltine said. "But it was still a shock for her when the end came. She returned here, she didn't know anybody in Cleveland. I offered her her old job back. You know how efficient Nika is—I never saw anybody prepare such beautiful records—and the nurse I had then was the gum-chewing kind. But her working days were over for a while, she said. Sam's little estate, his insurance, took care of her needs."

"Did you see much of her back then?"

"Oh, maybe once a month we'd have dinner or see a show. She was still interested in my work and my patients. As a matter of fact,

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that's how she met Bob Glass, when she dropped by the office one afternoon. Glass was that fellow Wittenger operated on in Boston, remember? She was intrigued with what I told her about him, about Glass being an ex-football player now walking around with practically half a heart. I warned her not to take Glass seriously, not if she didn't want another tragic romance.

"Personally, Wittenger or not, I didn't think Glass would make it—not with his temperament and strenuous ideas about living. But I guess Nika felt sorry for him, and in a few months they were married."

"And Glass died," Joel said.

"He went fast," Hazeltine sighed. "Faster than anybody predicted. They were on a cruise ship coming back from their honeymoon in the Caribbean. Glass was found dead in a deck chair. Terrible for Nika, of course."

Joel made a dry sound with his lips.

He got up and poured himself some water from the cooler. "Who was the third husband, Charlie?"

Hazeltine looked at him. "You're beginning to feel it," he said. "That same suspicion I got when I learned Nika was engaged for a third time."

"To another one of your patients?"

"No, not this time. To a man named Ray Simpson. He wasn't my patient, he was Dr. Howell's."

"A heart case, then."

"He'd had two coronaries when Howell sent him to me. I couldn't help the poor man—the lining was like tissue paper."

"And Nika married him."

"It was Howell who told me about the marriage, which he'd advised Simpson against. When he told me the name of the bride I was surprised—even shocked, I guess. It seemed to confirm my worst fears, that Nika was some kind of—buzzard, feeding off sick men."

"Did you ever explain the coincidence?"

"Well, it wasn't a coincidence, really. I had mentioned Simpson to Nika when she told me she wanted to go back to work, only in private nursing. Simpson needed somebody and Nika needed a job, that's all there was to it. And you know what happens so often between private nurses and their unmarried patients. Simpson was a long-time bachelor, but he succumbed to Nika."

"And then he succumbed, period."

"Yes," Hazeltine said nervously. He took out another cigarette

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and lit it, this time without hesitation. "He died a month after the wedding."

"And he was rich?"

"No, no," Hazeltine said quickly. "Please don't misunderstand, Joel. Simpson wasn't really *rich*, and neither were the other two. They were fairly well-off and they did have sizeable insurance policies— Oh, don't worry, I gave the subject a lot of thought. Especially after Nika came back into my life. To be completely honest with you, Joel, I was a little afraid of her, afraid that she had *used* me in a peculiar kind of way. I was attracted to her, of course—most men are.

"And she has a way of making a man feel clever and talented and—all those things. And she's intelligent, Joel. You probably don't realize how well read Nika is. She didn't squander all that insurance money, she used it very soundly, made good investments, used it culturally, if you know what I mean. She traveled a lot—went to Europe after Cernak's death. She learned to speak French before the trip, in about two months. Can you imagine? Went to one of those language schools and learned it, just like that. And when you really *know* her, Joel, she can be as sweet and as charming as a sixteen-year-old.

"Look, you know what I'm talking about. A doctor begins to *sense* things about character—you develop a special kind of ability to judge people after a while. That's why I know I was wrong about Nika, that she wasn't what I thought she was. She's an *angel*, Joel. It's a childish description, and God knows I'm not a child, but that's what Nika is. And I'm going to do my damndest to make her happy." He put out the cigarette and met his friend's eyes. "Don't look like that, Joel. I know I'm an old fool. But I love this woman, and I don't think I could love her if she was a money vulture or anything like that. After all," he smiled, "you'll have to admit one thing. When it comes to money, I'm not exactly King Midas, am I?"

The younger doctor pushed back his chair.

"All right," Hazeltine said. "All right, I know I'm talking too much about it. That's not why I came here. Let's get down to the nitty-gritty, as the kids say. What have you got for me in that nice white folder of yours? In those fancy-typed records?"

"Yes," Joel said in a dull voice, "Nika does make fine-looking records, Charlie. I'll sure hate to lose her—"

"Well, what's the story? What do my tests show?"

When Joel didn't answer, Dr. Hazeltine's mouth opened. He wasn't

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feeling well. A pain, made familiar by years of description, coursed from his breastbone to his arm. It was the pain that had brought him to his friend's office the week before.

"It's not good, Charlie," Joel Winkler said gravely.

Then he handed Hazeltine the folder, so neatly typed, so methodically arranged.

DETECTIVERSE

THE PERFECT CRIME

by COLLEEN J. HOUGHTALING

To get away with murder,
One needs an alibi—
A friend or two will often do
For a convincing lie.

"Eliminate the motive,"
Hitchcock was known to say,
And in attempts to solve the case
Cops look the other way.

But friends can be unfaithful
And motives hard to hide—
The murder case that's not pursued
Is one of suicide.

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a *NEW* short story by

DAVID PIERCE

Since his first short-story sale to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *in 1986, David Pierce has sold more than ten stories. He, his wife Chonda, and young daughter Chera live in Smyrna, Tennessee. He received a B.S. degree in journalism in 1982. "While in college," he says, "I worked full-time in building maintenance and learned a couple of important things: one, that I could make more money fixing a leaky faucet than writing; and, two, that I loved fiction. I'm still in building maintenance, but some of my best story ideas come while I'm adding a couple of pounds of freon to an A/C unit."*

At game time, all the Golden Agers wanted Bobby to be on their team—which was just the way Bobby wanted it. First he'd win their trust, then he'd take their jewels . . .

DR. WOORLEY'S BLACK BAG

by DAVID PIERCE

Bobby Pritchard clicked the big car's headlights to bright as he drove slowly under the arched Paradise-by-the-Sea sign. From the back, one really couldn't tell what the sign said, even with the high beams. But the back of the sign was all Bobby was ever going to see again, because he was leaving for good.

Paradise-by-the-Sea was a quaint little resort just off the East Coast and had been the location of the annual Golden Agers of America retreat for the past dozen years, bringing to the little town, where Bobby was the ace mechanic, some of the nicest grandparents anyone would ever want to meet—and, as far as Bobby was concerned, some of the richest.

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Bobby had always complained about the large influx of oldsters during the week-long event—never able to quite see the trees for the forest, until one day he ran smack dab into a treetrunk wearing a diamond necklace. Suddenly he had his eyes opened and he saw the meaning of life, the meaning of the Golden Agers invading his hometown every year.

So a few weeks before the thirteenth annual retreat, Bobby quit his full-time job as a mechanic and went to work at Paradise-by-the-Sea, along with a bunch of high-school kids half his age, as a valet/waiter/greeter/games player. Bobby, with his ulterior motive tucked away safely in his back pocket, proved to be such a natural with some of the older adults that he became something of a favorite among the Golden Agers. So that at game time everyone wanted Bobby to be on their team—which was just the way Bobby wanted it. First he'd win their trust, then he'd take their jewels.

Bobby patted the soft leather case that rested on the seat next to him. It used to belong to Dr. Woorley, as did the car. Now the car, the bag, and everything in the bag belonged to Bobby. He was so proud of the way the evening had unfolded, almost scriptlike, so proud of the loot he had scavenged, that he smiled brightly as he drove along, brighter than the glistening hood ornament on the mile-long Cadillac. And then he laughed loudly, louder than the vibration from the front-end shimmy.

What a shame, Bobby thought. The man drove a thirty-thousand-dollar car less than a year old and he couldn't keep the thing aligned. He could have had it done for less than eighty bucks. Not that it mattered. Bobby was going to ditch the car first chance he got. With the loot in the black bag, he could buy several Cadillacs.

The car began to shudder. Bobby increased his speed, like a pilot trying to get through turbulence, and the left front side of the car dropped and the bumper kissed the asphalt with a bang. The pavement screamed and spit sparks that pitted the clean white paint along the driver's side of the Cadillac. Bobby was jolted, much like a kid on a seesaw whose partner has suddenly jumped off, while the left front tire rolled noiselessly across the double yellow line and into a gnat-infested swamp.

Bobby jerked the steering wheel a hard right, trying to turn the car back away from the shoulder, and the leather bag slid across the seat and stopped against his thigh. He stretched out a protective arm. Then the right tire took off to the swamp and the right bumper

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dropped and began digging its own furrow at a speed still above the legal limit.

Clawing frantically for the door handle as the headlights skipped across the watery marsh the car was careening for, Bobby cursed Dr. Woorley for having neglected the car's alignment. The door flew open and he spilled out of the front seat onto the ground, where the smells of the burning asphalt, and now the newly plowed soil, were strong. The ground was soft and the thick grass almost like a pillow. He could have been falling onto a feather bed. He could hear the Cadillac, farther away, splashing, bubbling, drowning.

As he reeled head over feet, something making a glassy, jingling sound tumbled past Bobby. He recognized it as the sound of the loot in the doctor's black bag. In the midst of his flipflopping, he smiled another broad smile of satisfaction—one that froze on his face, to be preserved for the authorities later, because his head found the only lump in the soft bed and hit it hard. Dr. Woorley's black bag came to a jingling stop only inches from his head.

Later, as the police and camera crews worked in the area cordoned off with yellow crime-scene tape, someone would comment that had the young man landed only a few inches over, perhaps *on* the doctor's bag, he'd probably have survived the crash without a single scratch.

"Okay, everybody," the short lady with glasses and a big purple bead necklace said loudly as she clapped her hands. The nametag on her lapel didn't give her name, only her title: GAMES DIRECTOR.

"The time limit is up and it seems most everyone is back. It's time to determine the winner of this year's scavenger hunt." The scavenger hunt was the biggest, most popular event of the retreat every year. *Nothing* was off limits; *nobody* locked their doors, and the Golden Agers came and went as they pleased. Now nearly a hundred of the retreaters piled their treasures onto card tables as the games director came by with her list, looking over the rims of her glasses and checking each team's finds.

After she made her rounds, she announced that Dr. Woorley's team had won. Even the disappointed clapped enthusiastically and then began the business of returning their finds.

"Howard, this is your dull razor!" Dr. Woorley called above the din.

Howard Spearman laughed and accepted his razor back from Dr. Woorley. "Congratulations," he said.

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"Thanks. Fun game, huh? I sure thought Bobby's team was going to give me a run for my money. Have you seen him around?"

Howard shook his head.

"Me neither. The last time I saw him, though, he was doing pretty good." Dr. Woorley discreetly slipped Cecil Johnson the lower plate Cecil had left lying out on his nightstand. "He had my black bag and he was filling it up right and left. Hey, whose are those?" Dr. Woorley pointed to Howard's pile of salvage.

"Oh, these are yours." Howard picked up the shiny lug nuts and shook them in his hand as if they were dice. "Took 'em off the front of your old Cadillac." Howard laughed and poured the shiny bits of metal into Dr. Woorley's cupped hand. "Don't worry, friend—I left one on each side just to make sure the tires wouldn't fall off."

DETECTIVERSE

FIFTH TIME UNLUCKY

by DAVID MARTINDALE

The rare-coin exhibit was the scene of suspense.
A browser suspected of stealing four cents!
When his fifth attempt failed,
He got caught and was jailed—
Pinching pennies, it seems, is a criminal offense.

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a *NEW* Jeffery Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Rand had been in Hong Kong two days and was anxious to get back to Leila in Sydney. "Look," he told Chow Yen, "I don't care about geomancers—I came about the package."

"Such impatience, Mr. Rand!" said Chow Yen. "One must understand our customs. Geomancers are very important to the commercial life of this city. They help determine the location of everything from bank buildings to religious shrines. A dying man might well consult a geomancer for the proper site of his burial. A few years back, the escalators in a newly constructed building were moved to a different angle on the advice of a geomancer. It is believed that much of the ill fortune of life comes from the improper positioning of one's home or business establishment . . ."

THE SPY AND THE GEOMANCERS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

On Rand's second morning in Hong Kong, the message he'd awaited finally appeared. It was in Veronica's gossip column in the *Hong Kong Tatler*, just as expected: "Visitors from Australia receive a special welcome each Tuesday afternoon at the maze in Tiger Balm Gardens. Look for the photographer in the striped suit."

He smiled and put down the paper. "Visitors from Australia" had been the key phrase Hastings told him to watch for. Then the smile faded as he wondered once again how he'd been talked into making the journey. It was merely the latest of Hastings' many ruses to lure him back from retirement. Rand and Leila had been visiting her cousins in Australia when the call came, London to Sydney, quite

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impressing cousin Susan at whose home they were staying. "It's really a simple matter," Hastings had said, speaking calmly from his office half a world away. "Just hop up to Hong Kong for me and pick up a package."

"They can't send it to you in a diplomatic pouch?"

"Not this, no. Do it for me, Rand. It'll only take you a couple of days at most. Naturally we'll pay all expenses." So he'd come, somewhat to Leila's dismay. She'd opted to remain in Sydney with her cousins and he'd promised to return no later than Wednesday.

"Watch Veronica's column in the *Tatler*," Hastings had told him. "You know the drill." Yes, he knew the drill all too well. Even after more than a decade's retirement as director of Concealed Communications, he couldn't get free of it. And so he flew into Kai Tak Airport, landing on a runway that stretched two miles into Kowloon Bay. He took a taxi through the busy Cross Harbour Tunnel to his hotel on Hong Kong Island and began reading the *Tatler*.

Veronica—no last name or photo—wrote a column for the *Tatler* every weekday. Rand had only to wait until Tuesday to see the message meant for him. By one o'clock that afternoon he was at the maze of colorfully painted concrete that was one of the main tourist attractions of Tiger Balm Gardens. He passed a woman hawking color slides from a battered tray hung from a strap round her neck, her pockets stuffed with British pounds and American dollars. Farther along there were children playing, and a young musician picking away at a stringed instrument unfamiliar to Rand. None of them tried to speak to him. He saw no sign of the photographer in the striped suit.

He made his way along the maze, sticking close to the painted concrete walls, nodding occasionally to the smiling Chinese who passed him by. Casually he wondered whether they thought him to be British or Australian or even American—a fiftyish businessman on holiday. Damn Hastings—what was he doing here, anyway?

Then, suddenly: "Accident! Accident!" a Chinese woman shouted as she ran toward and by him in a panic. He turned the next corner of the maze and saw a small group of people standing around a figure on the ground. As he drew nearer, he saw it was a man in a striped suit. "What happened here?" he asked a teenaged boy.

"Stone fall and hit him on the head!"

The stone was a colorfully decorated birdhouse made of concrete, with two levels of openings on all sides. Apparently it had perched

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on the concrete wall of the maze. "It just fell by itself?" Rand asked, staring up at the seven-foot-high wall.

One of the women in the crowd spoke up. "It is a bad place. The geomancers have said so."

"Did anyone actually see it happen?"

They looked at him blankly and some began to move away, sensing he was asking too many questions. Rand studied the wall at the place where the birdhouse had stood among the branches of an overhanging tree. No one was there now.

No package was visible on the ground by the body. There was only the man in the striped suit with a camera around his neck and a terrible wound in his forehead—the man Rand had traveled five thousand miles to meet.

Rand's first inclination was to telephone Hastings back in London, but it was still the middle of the night there. It might be more important to contact the people in league with the dead man, to learn whether the package Hastings was expecting could still be delivered or whether it had been taken in the maze.

At this point his only contact with them was through the woman who wrote the gossip column for the *Hong Kong Tatler*.

The *Tatler* was located in one of the big new downtown office buildings squeezed between two banks, as if symbolic of the power money had in this city. When Rand inquired about Veronica, he was kept waiting for some time before being shown to the cluttered office of a rumpled little man named Desmond Blake, the newspaper's features editor. Blake removed his glasses and passed a hand over weary eyes before focusing them on his visitor. "Mr. Rand, is it?"

"That's correct. I'm here on a visit from Sydney and I'd like to speak with your gossip columnist, Veronica."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. I've never met the woman. She's phoned me exactly twice in two years, both times to say her column would be late. You see, Veronica was the name adopted by a gossip columnist for another paper, the *Hong Kong Weekly*, in the early years of this century. About five years ago we decided to start a daily column of our own, using that same name as the byline. Originally it was written by a young woman in the office, but when she left to marry and raise a family she passed the job on to a friend of hers. The friend preferred complete anonymity and I agreed."

"How can you pay her if you don't know her name?"

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"My, you do have a great many questions about our affairs, Mr. Rand."

"An item in this morning's column directed visiting Australians to a photographer in the maze at the Tiger Balm Gardens. I went there and found the man had been killed, perhaps murdered."

"Oh?" Desmond Blake made a hasty note on a deskpad. "Are you with the police?"

"No, but it's important to me to speak with Veronica."

"I'm afraid I can't help. Her salary is deposited to a bank account in the name of Veronica Smith. That's all I know."

"How can I reach the woman who wrote the column before the current Veronica?"

"I don't know. She and her husband moved to the States. We've lost touch with her." He smiled a bit grimly. "Although the current Veronica might still be in touch with her."

"I see. It's something of a closed circle, isn't it?"

"Her column comes in every day, by mail or delivery, and it's good. That's all I care about."

Rand got to his feet, realizing there was nothing more to be learned here. "Thank you, Mr. Blake. I'm sorry I took up your time."

The editor put his reading glasses back on. "Can you find your way out?"

"I think so."

There was only one Veronica Smith listed in the telephone book, although there were six other Smiths who used the initial V. in combination with various middle initials. He knew it was a waste of time, but Rand called them all from his hotel room. As he'd expected, none was the Veronica he sought.

By that time it was five in the afternoon, making it 9:00 A.M. in London. Rand waited another twenty minutes and placed a call to the private line in Hastings' office. When the familiar voice came on, he said, "Your old friend from Australia has a bit of a problem. The package was not delivered. The messenger died."

"How?" Hastings asked, catching the tension in Rand's voice.

"A birdhouse fell on him. I'm told it was a bad place according to geomancers."

"Anyplace is a bad one to die in. Be careful, Rand."

"What have you gotten me into?"

"Go to a man named Chow Yen, on Shouson Hill Road near Deep Water Bay."

"All right . . ."

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Shouson Hill Road ran along the edge of the bay, curving into a network of roads that led finally to the gracious old Repulse Bay Hotel he'd read about in the guidebooks. The area had been overbuilt with white-concrete slabs, reminding Rand of the less rewarding sights of the French Riviera. But the houses on Shouson Hill were still nice, giving a hint of the days when this southern end of Hong Kong island was a secluded retreat.

He found Chow Yen's house without difficulty, then drove his rented car to the nearest public phone to announce his arrival in advance. There were several cars in the street and driveway and he didn't want to walk into something unexpected.

"Hastings suggested I call on you," he told Chow Yen when the man came on the phone. "Would this be a good time?"

"For my old friend Hastings any time is good. Come, of course!"

Chow Yen proved to be a balding Chinese who greeted Rand while seated at a green-felt table with a half dozen other men. Rand had the impression his arrival had interrupted some sort of gambling game, though there was no evidence of cards or chips or dice.

"Ah, Mr. Rand!" Chow Yen said, rising to offer his hand. "A pleasure, to be sure!"

Rand had been admitted by a dark-haired European woman who'd led him into the room without a word. He had taken her to be a servant and was surprised when Chow Yen introduced her. "This is my wife, Carmella."

Rand shook her hand and she said, in good but accented English, "It is a pleasure to welcome you to our house, Mr. Rand. You come from Australia?"

"Yes, but I'm really from England. My wife and I are visiting relatives in Sydney."

"Ah."

Chow Yen took her elbow. "Carmella, please bring refreshments for our guests while Mr. Rand and I conduct our business in the study."

Rand followed him into a book-lined room with leather armchairs and a computer screen that was reviewing the day's closing prices on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Any London broker would have felt at home there. "Are you a speculator?" Rand asked him.

"I am a gambler. Legalized gambling here is limited to horse racing and the lottery, though many of us find the pleasures of the Exchange tops either one."

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"I was to meet a man at the Tiger Balm Gardens and carry a package back to London for our friend Hastings."

"Yes?"

"The man was killed, possibly murdered."

Chow Yen nodded. "I believe I heard it on the news reports. They interviewed a geomancer about the positioning of the maze."

Rand's patience was running out. He'd been in the city two days and he was anxious to get back to his wife in Sydney. "Look, I don't care about geomancers—I came about the package."

"Such impatience, Mr. Rand! One must understand our customs. Geomancers are very important to the commercial life of this city. They help determine the location of everything from bank buildings to religious shrines. A dying man might well consult a geomancer for the proper site of his burial. A few years back, the escalators in a newly constructed building were moved to a different angle on the advice of a geomancer. It is believed that much of the ill fortune of life comes from the improper positioning of one's home or business establishment."

There was a knock on the door and Carmella entered with drinks. "Will you be joining us for dinner?" she asked Rand.

"No, thank you—I must get back to my hotel. I hope to leave Hong Kong in the morning."

"A pity."

When she had gone, Rand said, "Your wife is a charming woman."

"I am a lucky man," Chow Yen agreed. "She is a great help in my business." A shadow seemed to pass across his face, but it vanished almost at once. "Now—where were we?"

"The package for Hastings," Rand reminded him.

"Are you aware of what it contained?"

"No."

"There was no sign of it with the man?"

"Not that I saw."

Chow Yen nodded. "The dead man was named Felix Ritter. He was a German who had a photography concession at the Gardens. It was useful for making certain deliveries."

"What about Veronica?"

"Her column is also useful."

"Who is she?"

A shrug. "No one knows."

"Someone gave her the item to use in her column."

Chow Yen was silent for more than a minute. He seemed deep in

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thought, but when his eyes closed Rand wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Presently they opened again and he said, "I have spoken of the geomancers. It is time you met one of them."

Rand tried to keep his impatience under control as the Chinese man left the room. He sipped his drink and watched the letters and numbers parade across the computer screen. Then Chow Yen was back in the room, accompanied by one of the men who'd been seated around the green-felt table. Rand could smell dinner was being prepared. "You will forgive me," Chow Yen said. "It was necessary to check your credentials, Mr. Rand. Your photograph was taken and faxed to London for an identity check. One cannot be too careful."

Rand wondered where the camera was hidden—somewhere in the bookcase facing him, no doubt. "I'm glad I passed," he said with a smile.

Chow Yen was all business now. His casual manner had vanished. "This is Leslie Wo, a geomancer by profession. He is the man you are seeking."

Wo was tall and slender, with a thin British-style moustache. "Mr. Rand, we have heard of you, of course. It was only necessary to confirm your identity. I will tell you what you want to know."

"Let's begin with the package," Rand suggested, still not certain why a geomancer was involved in espionage work for British Intelligence.

"All right. As you surely know, Hong Kong is scheduled to be returned to the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997, when the British mandate expires. That is not so many years away. It is a certainty that the Chinese government will make many changes, especially in the largely undeveloped areas of the New Territories on the mainland. It is equally certain that the Chinese, being Chinese and aware of the long-standing customs here, will seek the advice of geomancers on the most favorable sites for new construction. They do not want to risk building on a Dragon's Vein or moving the Elements, Stems, and Branches out of their auspicious alignment. This fixation with the geomantic quality of the land is called *feng shui*, Wind and Water."

"I still don't get the point," Rand admitted.

Wo smiled. "Wouldn't British Intelligence be interested in knowing, several years in advance, exactly where on this island and in the New Territories the Chinese will be building? Every airbase, every missile launcher, every radar station? The entire defense posture of Hong Kong as it will be in ten or twenty years?"

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"Are you telling me that intelligence data is being furnished on the basis of the predictions of some geomancer?" Rand asked.

"The predictions are quite accurate, and I am the geomancer in question."

"Why couldn't it be sent by fax machine to London, or by diplomatic pouch?"

"Phone lines can be tapped, and there are spies at Government House. The least hint of what we are about would be fatal to our plans. The Chinese would never consult local geomancers if they suspected the British knew in advance what their advice would be. They would import their own experts and bribe them to give false recommendations."

In the bizarre world of intelligence work, it made a certain amount of sense. "Why run the item in the *Tatler*? Why not simply invite me here and hand over the package?"

"You were never to meet me, Mr. Rand—nor Chow Yen, either. You were to serve only as a messenger. We had used Veronica before, so we used her again."

"Chow Yen says no one knows who she is."

"That is correct. We figure if no one knows, no one can find her, pressure her, intercept our messages. She is perfectly safe."

"Did the person who killed Felix Ritter get the package?" Rand asked.

"That is very doubtful. From what we saw on the news, the birdhouse had to have been pushed over on Felix from outside the maze, on the other side of the concrete wall. Once the killer had done that, how could he risk entering the maze to retrieve a package from a victim who would be surrounded by tourists, and perhaps even police?"

"Then where is it?"

"Felix would have hidden it somewhere nearby, and retrieved it when he saw you arrive."

"Will you go there with me?" Rand asked him.

Leslie Wo glanced at the windows. "It is growing dark now. We will go in the morning. I will call at your hotel at nine o'clock."

The unexplained death of Felix Ritter garnered a fair amount of space in the following morning's papers, with the usual sidebar interviews with local geomancers. Officials of the Gardens had their own man available to the press, assuring everyone that the maze was not built over a Dragon's Vein and was perfectly safe to visit.

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More interesting to Rand was Veronica's gossip column in the *Tatler*. "Disappointment for Australian visitors," she wrote, "but all is not lost. Return visits to the Tiger Balm Gardens are always rewarding."

When Rand slipped into Leslie Wo's luxurious Rolls-Royce shortly after nine, Veronica's column was the first thing he mentioned. "Did your people plant that item, too?" he asked.

"No. Chow Yen is baffled by it. But it seems to indicate the package is still available."

As they threaded through the crowded streets, Rand complimented him on the car. "It's not often I get to ride in a Rolls, even back in England."

"They are not that exceptional in Hong Kong. We have more Rolls-Royces per capita than anywhere else on earth. One hotel uses its fleet of eight to transport guests from the airport. The car telephone has a direct line to room service, so your food and drink can be waiting when you arrive." He spoke quickly in Chinese to the chauffeur and the limousine turned onto the road to the Tiger Balm Gardens.

"An odd name for a park," Rand commented as they drove through the gates. "What does it mean?"

Leslie Wo smiled. "The gardens were built by a wealthy Chinese family whose fortune came from an ointment of that name, supposed to cure virtually all ills."

The driver stayed with the car while Leslie Wo led Rand along the rim of the gardens overlooking Causeway Bay. "It's a beautiful place," Rand said.

"Lovely. I think I would want to die here when my time comes. Despite the tourists and the peddlers, one can still appreciate the colorful flowers and rare birds. But come—the maze will be open now. If anyone awaits us, it will be there."

Rand recognized immediately the woman with her battered tray of color slides. He approached her and said, "You were here yesterday when the man was killed."

"I am here every day," she said. She was short and a bit stocky, probably in her forties, with black hair and features that were oriental but not quite Chinese.

Surprisingly, Leslie Wo knew her by name. "Hello, Astrid. How's business?"

She grinned at the sight of him, revealing the gap of a missing

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tooth. "Ah, Leslie Wo! What brings you to this place? Are you in need of a little balm?"

"Not now, Astrid. A friend died here yesterday."

She nodded. "Felix. Poor Felix—he had outlived his time."

"What do you mean by that?" Rand asked.

But she merely grinned and Leslie Wo said, "We'll see you later, Astrid."

"That's a fancy name for this part of the world," Rand commented as they entered the brightly painted maze.

"In her younger days she was one of the city's most expensive prostitutes," Wo told him. "She saved a great deal of money and then lost it all at the Happy Valley racecourse. Some say the license plates of her Rolls-Royce had ill-omened digits. In any event, she was destitute by age forty and forced to take this job hawking color slides. Her body could no longer command the fees it once did. One might say that, like Felix Ritter, she has outlived her time."

"What was his problem?"

"He still thought of espionage work as a glamorous profession."

The concrete birdhouse stood against the wall where it had fallen—Rand could still see the bloodstains on one corner. Oddly, the large, colorful birds of the Gardens continued to visit it, swooping low over the ground and then squeezing through its doorways for a brief stay inside.

Rand could just reach the top of the wall by standing on his tiptoes and stretching his arms up. "If the other side is the same height, the killer might have pushed the birdhouse over without needing a ladder or a tree," he suggested.

They walked to the other end of the maze, sticking to the right-hand wall to guide them out. After a few dead ends, they were free. "I have not done that in years," Leslie Wo admitted. "The children love it, of course."

"But there was no hiding place for the package. How large was it?"

"It was a thick business-sized envelope with perhaps twenty onion-skin sheets of paper folded inside. Hardly a package at all."

"Ritter might have concealed it in his pocket or under his shirt," Rand suggested.

Wo shook his head. "I spoke last night with a friend at Police Headquarters. No envelope was found. There was nothing but his wallet and keys and camera."

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"Could the twenty pages have been microfilmed?"

"Not by Felix, certainly. He was only a paid messenger. We saw no need to microfilm it, since this method of delivery has worked well in the past."

"The killer must have taken it first, before he pushed the birdhouse down on Ritter's head."

But Wo wouldn't accept that, either. "If Felix had lost the envelope, he wouldn't have been in the maze waiting for you to appear, Mr. Rand. And he must have been standing still for the killer to push the birdhouse down on him."

"What about the camera? Could anything have been hidden inside it?"

"No. My friend at Headquarters checked it. There was not enough space for the envelope, anyway."

Rand pondered for a moment, watching a long-tailed bird swoop low over the maze. "What about the item in Veronica's column this morning?"

"I told you we had nothing to do with it. Miss Veronica may be attempting to recover the envelope herself."

"How do you contact her when you have messages to run in her column?"

Leslie Wo's expression didn't change. "That is Chow Yen's responsibility. I believe his wife makes the contact."

"I see."

On the way out of the Gardens, they waved to Astrid, busy selling her color slides to passing tourists.

At the house on Shouson Hill Road, Chow Yen was in a state of great agitation. "Something has gone terribly wrong, Mr. Rand. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Mr. Hastings is most disturbed by events and has threatened to remove us from the network. What does that mean?"

Rand had no idea what Hastings had meant. "He's certainly not going to have you killed," Rand assured him, feeling reasonably safe with that assurance. "I think we can straighten this out if we can locate Veronica."

"Veronica?"

"If you didn't give her that item in this morning's column, it means she thought it up herself. Maybe she's decided to cut herself in and go after this package or envelope herself. I imagine the Chinese would pay well for it. You might even pay for it yourself to keep it

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from falling into their hands. She must think it's still hidden at the Gardens and was hoping we'd lead her to it."

"Was someone watching you?"

"No one that we noticed." Rand decided to come to the point. "Leslie Wo tells me your wife Carmella may make the arrangements with Veronica."

"Carmella was a friend of the original Veronica. When she moved away, my wife continued to deal with her successor."

Rand blinked. "Could I speak with her alone, please?"

"Why alone?"

"Because I'm trying to help you. Please trust me."

Chow Yen left him alone in the sunny room overlooking Deep Water Bay. The city provided marvelous vistas in almost every direction. Rand wondered what it would be like ten years from now when the Union Jack was replaced by the flag of the People's Republic of China. But then that was what everyone in Hong Kong wondered these days. He'd heard that the luxury hotels were already booking rooms for the night of June 30, 1997, when the momentous change would occur. People from all over the world—writers, reporters, tourists—wanted to be on hand for the event.

The door opened quietly and closed behind her, and Chow Yen's wife Carmella stood facing Rand. "You wished to see me?"

"Yes. I understand you are the only contact with Veronica."

"I call her with the items, that's true. I arrange to pay her when that is necessary."

"Who is she?"

"I've never seen her. We talk only by phone."

"And she has a bank account under the name of Veronica Smith. I know about that already. I want to know who she is, Carmella. She may have been responsible for Felix Ritter's death."

"The present Veronica took over after my friend moved away. That's all I know."

"But you have a number where she might be reached?"

"Of course."

"I want you to call her right now. I want you to tell her to run no more items for the Australian tourists. Tell her it isn't necessary because the missing item has been located. Tell her Leslie Wo will retrieve it from the Tiger Balm Gardens tonight."

"I—"

"Make the call, Carmella—if there really is a Veronica to call."

"There is one, all right. Whatever your suspicions are, they're

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wrong." She walked to the telephone and started dialing a number she obviously knew by heart. She stopped after three digits. "There's something you should know first."

"What's that?"

"Veronica is a man."

It was eight o'clock that evening when Leslie Wo stepped out of his car and entered the Tiger Balm Gardens through a rear service entrance used for deliveries and rubbish collection. He walked alone, and Rand waited until he had a lead of fifty feet before he slipped out of the back seat and hurried along through the shadows behind him.

There were lights in the Gardens at night, but only a few when it wasn't officially open. Crossing the deeply shadowed areas on his way to the maze, Wo was invisible much of the time. Even Rand, who prided himself on his night vision, lost sight of him for several seconds. When he reappeared, closer to the maze entrance than Rand had expected, the second figure came into view almost at once.

It was the sudden shock of seeing the approaching shadow that caused Rand to make his move. He started running and shouted "*Veronica!*"

He saw Wo whirl around at the warning, going into a crouch as he reached for his gun. Then there was a flash of fire and the crack of a pistol, and Wo went down. Rand was on the other man by then, clubbing him to the ground with his fists and kicking the gun from his hand before he could fire again. "You crazy fool! Why did you fire?"

Desmond Blake, the features editor of the *Hong Kong Tatler*, rolled over and pressed his bleeding lip. "He was reaching for a gun!"

Rand wrapped the pistol in a handkerchief and dropped it into his own pocket. Then he ran to where Leslie Wo had fallen. The bullet had taken him in the center of the chest. He was dead.

Rand stood and looked down at him sadly. Just that day Wo had expressed a desire to die at the Tiger Balm Gardens when his time came. He walked back to where the newspaper editor still cringed on the ground. "You're Veronica, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"Chow Yen's wife said it was a man, yet you told me a woman had called you twice when Veronica's column was late. One of the voices might have belonged to a friend of the columnist, but the same voice—male or female—would have been used for all Veron-

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ica's calls. Therefore either you or Carmella was probably lying. I picked you when I heard the male voice she spoke to on the phone today. What happened, Blake? Did you decide to cut yourself in?"

"I could write the column as well as the original Veronica, and it meant a little extra money for me. I inherited Chow Yen's business as well. When that package disappeared, I decided to get you back here, hoping to get it from you and sell it to the highest bidder."

"I'll bet you would have."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Call the police. We'll let a court decide whether or not you fired in self-defense."

Hours later, Rand sat across the table from Chow Yen and Carmella. It hadn't been easy informing them of the death of their geomancer friend. The only compensation was the thick sealed envelope that rested on the table between them.

"So you found it," Chow Yen said, his voice tired.

"I found it."

"I should have told you sooner about Veronica being a man," Carmella said.

"That wouldn't have made any difference. The thing had to play itself out. Perhaps it was as much my fault as anyone's, because I didn't realize until tonight the one truth that was staring us in the face all along. There was no murder at the Tiger Balm Gardens, at least not until Blake shot Leslie Wo tonight."

"But Felix Ritter—"

"Ritter's death was nothing but a bizarre accident, though it acted as a catalyst for all that followed."

"Do you mean the geomancers were correct about the construction of the maze?"

"No. I mean that we all jumped to the conclusion that someone pushed the birdhouse off the wall and onto his head, but if you think about it that doesn't make sense. If the killer was on the other side of the wall, he could have reached up and touched the birdhouse, maybe even pushed it over, but he couldn't have seen his victim's exact position even if he was talking to him. Climbing up the tree on the other side didn't seem likely, either, because his intended victim could easily have noticed him just a few feet above his head and dodged the falling birdhouse. It hit him in the forehead, remember."

"Then what did happen?" Carmella asked.

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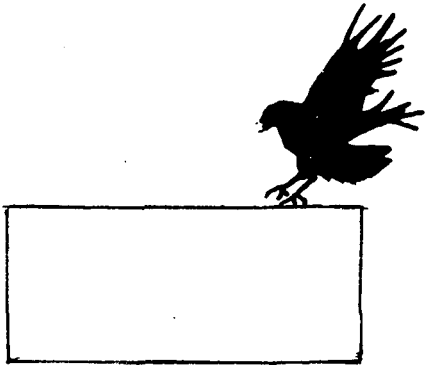
"Well, what do we know? That Ritter was to deliver this envelope to me and that it wasn't on his person. It was hidden somewhere nearby on the grounds of the Tiger Balm Gardens."

And then Chow Yen understood. "In the birdhouse."

"Yes. The openings were big enough for fairly large birds—certainly they'd accommodate even a thick envelope. Tonight I remembered seeing a bird squeeze into one of the openings as if the opening was partly blocked by something, and that gave me the idea. After the police came for Blake, I went back and looked. The envelope was still in there. Felix Ritter, probably reaching up on tiptoe to retrieve it, pulled that concrete birdhouse down on his own head."

Chow Yen walked over to the window and stood looking out at the lights on the yachts far below. "Will you take the envelope back with you?"

"Yes. And then our own brand of geomancers will get a crack at it. Another round of games. I'm sorry that men like Leslie Wo sometimes have to die from them."



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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

In the early days of the post-World War II paperback-original crime novel, it was easy to generalize about the field. The dominant type of book was hardboiled, tough, sexy, and directed mainly to a male audience. Now that has changed. *Every* type of mystery fiction, from the toughest to the coziest, may be published in paperback original, and a high proportion of paperback originals are of such high quality they might have been published in any format. Below is a roundup of five recent mass-market paperback originals selected to prove both points.

*** Joe R. Lansdale: *Cold in July,* Bantam, $3.50. This powerfully written novel begins with Richard Dane, proprietor of an East Texas picture-framing business, shooting and killing a burglar in defense of home and family. The dead man's reputed father, just out of prison, is first a vengeful menace to Dane, then an unexpected ally in a bizarre and unlikely search for the truth. Lansdale reaches the reader on a gut level, like the best of the Fifties paperback specialists. I wonder, though, how many readers—male and female—will share the exasperation of Dane's wife toward his quixotic, code-of-the-West quest.

*** Charlotte MacLeod writing as Alisa Craig: *Trouble in the Brasses,* Avon, $3.50. As far removed as possible from the tough paperbacks of the Fifties is this latest case for Canadian Mountie Madoc Rhys by one of the leading practitioners of the humorous detective novel. Here Madoc tries to find out who is after the brass players—first with practical jokes, then with murder—of the Wagstaffe Symphony Orchestra, currently led by his father, Sir Madoc Rhys. An enjoyably eccentric cast act out a cleverly constructed and well clued puzzle plot.

*** W. Glenn Duncan: *Rafferty: Wrong Place, Wrong Time,* Gold Medal, $3.50. Dallas private eye Rafferty becomes an unwitting accessory to murder and tries to help an octagenarian harassed by the neighbor kids (to the point of turning his rifle on them). A prime example of the smartass private eye, Rafferty will not endear himself to all readers, but the two-pronged story is original, surprising, and fast-moving.

*** Marion Babson: *Murder Sails at Midnight,* Bantam, $3.50. In a novel first published in Britain in 1975, Babson presents a variation on Patricia McGerr's classic *Pick Your Victim.* In the first scene, a hired killer known as Butler accepts a contract to kill a woman on a trans-Atlantic crossing. But which of the first-class female passengers is the intended victim—and which of the attentive male passengers is Butler? The novel is tricky and readable, with an especially nice scene of a shipboard meal during

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a seasick-making storm. (It's rather ironic that this is part of Bantam's Murder Most British series, since most of the characters are American—as is the author, though she lives in Britain.)

*** Max Allan Collins: *Bullet Proof,* Bantam, $3.50. Director of Public Safety Eliot Ness battles labor racketeers in 1937 Cleveland. This is not as good as last year's *Butcher's Run* or the private-eye historicals about Nate Heller (who makes a guest appearance here), but it's marked by the author's usual gusto and professionalism.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Curses!,* Mysterious, $15.95. The first case for Gideon Oliver since the Edgar-winning *Old Bones* (1987) finds the Skeleton Detective in good form, returning to Yucatan, where in 1982 he had been on the scene of the discovery and subsequent disappearance of a Mayan codex. Among members of the reunited "dig" party, most amateurs, an ancient curse on despoilers of the site seems to be coming true—sort of. Elkins is one of the best current proponents of the pure classical whodunit.

*** Michael Collins: *Castrato,* Donald I. Fine, $17.95. Also among the best at what he does, Collins (a.k.a. Dennis Lynds, among other names) here involves one-armed private eye Dan Fortune in a tangled case—involving the C.I.A., F.B.I., and a couple of macho soldier-of-fortune brothers—that takes him from his new home of Santa Barbara to his old New York turf. Though not quite as successful as some recent Fortune novels—partly because the deeply felt left-wing political message sometimes seems more intrusive than usual—this is still an impressive job. And Fortune on his soapbox can be eloquent indeed, as in his definition of a thief as "someone who steals last and doesn't have the luck and power to keep what he stole and build on it."

*** William X. Kienzle: *Eminence,* Andrews and McMeel, $15.95. In his eleventh case, Detroit's Father Robert Koesler encounters another Father Robert, who is gaining a reputation for miracle healings performed in a five-man monastery in a converted bank building. Immensely readable, with an interesting plot, though (as always with Kienzle) the religious background is the novel's strongest feature.

*** Robert B. Parker: *Playmates,* Putnam, $17.95. In a better book than his last couple, Boston private eye Spenser investigates rumors of basketball point-shaving at Taft University. The usual elements are all here—cooking, wisecracks, analysis with Susan, violence with Hawk, even a little plot (it's on page 152). Best sequence consists of Spenser's interviews with star forward Dwayne Woodcock's professors, who try to explain how he can maintain a B-minus/C-plus average without being able to read.

** Ron Goulart: *The Wisemann Originals,* Walker, $16.95. A new detective team, Ajax Novelty Company operative Rudy Navarro and his alcoholic art consultant Jack Briggs, look into a case involving a missing trunk full of drawings by

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a German-Jewish satirist who reportedly died at Dachau. Very short and very frantic, this is typical Goulart in its style, pace, and facetious dialogue, but definitely not prime Goulart.

Among the reprints is the first American paperback edition of Simenon's *Maigret's Memoirs* (Avon, $3.50), in which France's most famous fictional detective tells his own story. This unusual and enjoyable item was first published in French in 1951, in English in 1963 . . . Domini Taylor's *Teacher's Pet* (Jove, $3.95) is an enthralling and well written 1987 novel of scholastic homicide, including one of recent fiction's most interesting murderers. (According to the 1981–85 supplement to Allen J. Hubin's *Crime Fiction* bibliography, Taylor is yet another byline of the enormously talented and versatile Roger Longrigg, who also writes as Frank Parrish and Ivor Drummond.)

Latest anthology of *EQMM* stories is *Murder on Cue* (Walker, $19.95), edited by Eleanor Sullivan. Previously published in paperback as *Ellery Queen's Media Favorites,* the volume gathers eighteen tales that were adapted for screen, stage, radio, or TV plus an Ellery Queen radio script from the Forties. Contributors range from Edgar Wallace and Henry James to Edward D. Hoch and Ruth Rendell. Most surprising inclusion lacks a murder but qualifies as a con-game story: Mary Orr's "The Wisdom of Eve," which became the Bette Davis classic *All About Eve.*

Speaking of media, fans of TV mystery series won't want to miss Ric Meyers' fascinating *Murder on the Air* (Mysterious, $12.95), full of acute analysis and inside details on selected shows from the early days of *Martin Kane* and *Man Against Crime* through more recent series like *Hill Street Blues* and *Murder, She Wrote.*

The Canadian firm Listen for Pleasure has plenty to offer mystery-loving commuters, particularly fans of the short story. *The Blue Geranium and Other Stories,* comprising four tales from Agatha Christie's *The Tuesday Club Murders,* is one of several audiocassettes of Miss Marple stories, admirably read by the current TV Marple—the best embodiment of the character I've seen on stage or screen—Joan Hickson. One of several *Ellery Queen Presents* collections has two of Edward D. Hoch's flavorful Ben Snow puzzles, "The Vanished Steamboat" and "Brothers on the Beach," plus tales by George Baxt and Jack Ritchie. For price information and a catalog of the many tapes available, contact Durkin Hayes Publishing Ltd., 3312 Mainway, Burlington, Ontario L7M 1A7, 1-800-263-5224, or 1 Columba Drive, Niagara Falls, NY 14305, 1-800-962-5200.

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a suspenseful reprint by

MARY HIGGINS CLARK

Mary Higgins Clark's first job out of school was as a stewardess with Pan Am—a job that provided her with ideas for more than one story when she started writing her highly successful fiction. "Milk Run" first appeared in the August 1958 issue of Extension *under the title "Deadline from Paradise."*

For more about the bestselling Mary Higgins Clark—on our cover this issue—see page 105 . . .

MILK RUN

by MARY HIGGINS CLARK

Where on earth could Dick be? Jen pulled off her overseas-uniform cap and pushed back the damp brunette ringlets that clustered on her forehead. The April sun shone bright and clear; the green water lapped at the land, but it was hot!

Bermuda, she reflected, might be paradise for honeymooners, but for the stewardesses who worked a flight down from New York, served sixty passengers a three-course lunch, laid over fifty minutes at Kindley Field, and prepared a hot dinner on the return trip, Bermuda was nothing but a milk run.

Why had Dick phoned Operations to make sure she hadn't been canceled from this flight? A sense of trouble, foreign to the sunny afternoon, filled her. It couldn't be cast aside even by thinking of the month since Dick had been the lone passenger on her first Bermuda flight. He had griped about his paper sending him down to do a series of articles on the "honeymoon paradise" and she had griped about being frozen on the honeymoon-paradise run for a month. The next day he'd been at the terminal to meet her flight and he'd been meeting it every day since.

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But this was her last Bermuda trip and next week Dick's assignment would be finished—he'd be back in New York, and they'd spend some lovely evenings making up for all the crowded hours at Kindley Field.

What had Dick meant yesterday when he confided he thought he had stumbled onto a really big story?

She felt a hand on her shoulder, turned, and was in Dick's arms. His kiss was urgent, brief, and fierce. "Jen, darling." It was the first time he had called her darling, but it seemed right and natural. "Listen as carefully as you've ever listened in your life because you've got to get this straight. Here—" he handed her a rolled-up copy of a magazine "—stuff this in your pocketbook and get it to my newspaper tonight. Go to the office, fifth floor, and ask for Bill Ryan, the night editor."

"Bill Ryan, fifth floor," Jen replied. "But—"

Dick cut her short. "I'll check with Operations. Fifteen minutes after they tell me your flight has landed, I'll call Ryan and tell him what to expect. Jen, I'm putting you in danger, but I can't help it."

"What danger, Dick?"

He hesitated. "You've certainly got a right to know. Jen, remember that carrier that vanished at the end of the Korean War? The papers were full of it."

Jen nodded soberly. "A boy I knew was on it."

"That ship was sabotaged. But over seven hundred men escaped and were taken prisoner. Their names, serial numbers, and the prison camps they've been sent to are listed in that magazine. The Reds would kill rather than see that list printed."

The loudspeaker in the terminal came on. The clear, precise British voice that never seemed hurried requested all passengers to assemble at Gate 2 for Federal Airlines flight 401 nonstop to Idlewild.

The announcement gave Jen a moment to think. How Dick had managed to get this magazine she didn't know, but obviously someone knew he had it—otherwise he'd be taking it to New York himself. "Do you think you were followed?" she whispered.

Dick started walking her to the gate. "I may have lost the car that was tailing me, but I don't know how many of them know I have this. I've signed up for the late New York flight to throw them off."

They stopped at the gate. Dick kissed her quickly, then reached into his wallet and pulled out a ring. "Jen, they may try to search

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me somehow. I bought this to give you in New York, but take it now. It will be safer with you."

Jen stared down at the solitaire diamond set in a narrow platinum band. An engagement ring, five minutes late. When Dick trusted her with the magazine, he had told her he loved her and needed her. "In a few days I'll make the conventional speech," he promised. She slipped the ring into an inside pocket of her uniform jacket, put a hand on his shoulder, kissed him, then raced across the field, up the ramp, and onto the plane.

Allan Bates, the purser, was standing by the door ready to close it. "For Pete's sake, Jen," he snapped. "Captain Evans is having a fit. We're two minutes behind schedule. You make the announcements while I give 'cabin secure.' You'd better not go near the flight deck till the Skipper calms down."

Jen caught her breath, straightened her cap, and turned on the mike. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome aboard. We are flying nonstop to Idlewild Airport. Our anticipated flight time is three hours and twenty-five minutes. Please fasten your seatbelts and do not smoke until the sign over the galley door goes off. Push the buzzer at your seat any time you want us—and a pleasant trip, everyone."

She snapped off the mike, pulled the reserved sign off the flight-service seat, and sat down. Allan joined her just before takeoff. He stared out the window as Jen leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Her shoulderbag dug into her side and she ran her fingers over it, thinking that she'd have to hide the bag immediately. Dick's warning that she might be followed rang in her ears and she tapped Allan's arm. He turned from the window and bent his head to catch her question.

"Did anyone sign for the flight just before takeoff?"

Allan nodded. "The ground rep first gave me a manifest with eight names. Thirty seconds later, he came tearing out with an amended manifest with three extra pax." He reached in his pocket. "Here's a copy."

Jen's eyes skimmed quickly down the sheet. Two Mr. and Mrs. They would be the honeymoon couples up front. Four women's names. That would be the four ladies traveling together who'd been telling her at the airport what a lovely time they had in Bermuda. And—here they were—the last three names: Hastings, Walter, seat six; Clinton, Andrew, seat nine; Carlson, August, seat eighteen. Jen

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shut her eyes. If Dick had been followed, someone might have seen him pass the magazine to her. Someone may have signed up for the flight at the last minute to get the magazine back from her. But which one?

Allan touched her arm. "Sign's off, Jen. Suppose you give the skipper a cup of coffee? I'll pass out the newspapers."

Jen went forward to the galley, carefully shut the door between it and the cabin. Being in the tiny galley, situated between the cabin and the flight deck, gave her a chance to think. She reasoned that if she hid her purse here, no passenger could possibly get at it without being noticed at once. If she prepared the dinner and Allan did the serving, she'd be able to guard the purse for almost the whole flight. Still, she'd better hide the bag well in case anyone tried to slip in and search for it. She rejected the grocery closets as being too convenient, bent down, and opened the door of the narrow, dark refrigerator.

On the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, almost level with the floor, were rows of various salads. She carefully reached the purse in and wedged it behind them.

Satisfied that it was out of sight, she straightened up and closed the refrigerator door. The satisfaction vanished when she noticed that the oil from one of the salads had made an ugly stain on her sleeve. She dabbed at it with a paper napkin, making it worse, and decided to forget it. Remembering the captain was waiting for coffee, she got out a cup, drew coffee from the tank, shook two lumps of sugar into it, then went forward to the flight deck.

"Hot, sweet, and black, Captain," she said, trying to make her voice light.

Evans would not respond. He looked at her, his usually pleasant face firm, his eyes cold. "Jen, I've been flying twenty years and one thing I've never tolerated is a member of my crew holding up a flight. I'm sorry, but I intend to write you up for this. If that was your boy friend in the terminal, he looks like a nice young fellow, but no matter what he had to say it wasn't important enough to hold up the plane."

It was important enough, Jen thought, but she said, "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize how late it was."

Allan was in the galley mixing cocktails when she returned. He thrust the small notebook in which he had scribbled the orders into her hand. "Finish these up, will you? I'll go back and try to do a little paperwork."

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Jen nodded. Preparing the cocktails would give her a chance to keep a watchful eye on the galley, and serving them would be an opportunity to study the passengers. Especially the latecomers.

She finished making the drinks, went into the cabin, and glanced at the notations Allan had made. Bending over the honeymooners in the first seats, she offered the tray. "I believe you wanted daiquiris."

They had been having a low, earnest conversation and looked up, startled. "Oh, thank you." The girl reached up, colored, and withdrew her hand as her husband took two glasses from the tray and offered her one with a slight ceremony.

Jen smiled. Bermuda might not be a bad place to go if you drank cocktails on the plane instead of serving them, and if you held hands with a brand-new husband. This boy was nice-looking, she thought, but Dick, with his curling brown hair, easy smile, and nonchalant air was much more exciting.

A tap on her shoulder quenched the flow of her happy-ever-after thoughts. The first officer was beside her, saying, "Jen, the captain says you should send the passengers up to see the flight deck."

Jen stared at him, dismayed. She'd forgotten that Captain Evans invariably invited the passengers forward. Now every passenger in the plane would go through the galley. But if she finished serving the cocktails at once and made some motions of starting dinner, she could guard the purse while the passengers went through.

The honeymooners stood up eagerly. "Could we be the first?" the boy asked.

The first officer answered for Jen. "Sure, come on." He started into the galley, and they rose and followed behind.

Jen passed the rest of the cocktails rapidly. A warning was tingling through her nerves, hammering at her brain. She had to get back to the galley.

The four women traveling together accepted the cocktails and gushed their thanks. At last the tray was empty. Jen dropped it flat against her side and started forward just as Allan called to her. She went to the rear of the plane where he was working at the small panel that served as a desk. "Jen, I can't find the extra baggage decs. They're not in the briefcase anywhere."

Jen set down the tray and bent over the briefcase. "They were in this compartment when we were coming down this morning." She glanced up ahead frantically, knowing it was no use trying to leave

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Allan until the declarations were found. The honeymooners had returned and the first officer was starting back toward the flight deck with the other young couple. Next time up, he'd be taking the three single men. Impatiently Jen shook all the papers out of the briefcase and spent agonizing minutes going through them. The declarations weren't there. She started to jam the papers back in the briefcase, but was stopped by Allan's sharp "Cut it out, Jen. Put those papers back straight. I'm fouled up as it is."

By the time she had the briefcase filled, the first officer was escorting the second young couple back to their seats. She watched, holding her breath, as he invited the three latecomers up forward together.

She glanced at Allan's sulky face and did not dare leave him. He met her look. "Try my topcoat, will you? Maybe I stuck them in my pocket."

Jen hurried to the closet, fished for Allan's coat, found it, and raced through the pockets. In the inside one, she found the missing declarations. She dropped them on his lap. "Here they are."

"That's a relief. Just read off the list of passengers to me and I'll see if I have all the declarations. Then we can start dinner."

Wanting to strangle him, Jen went down the names. When she had finally finished, the group of four women were returning from the flight deck. Every passenger in the plane had gone through the galley now.

As Jen raced up the aisle, she was stopped by one of the women. "Isn't it a little careless, Miss, to leave all those doors open in the galley? I ruined my stocking on the refrigerator handle."

Jen stared at her, hurried forward to the galley, and slammed the door between it and the cabin. The galley was a mess. Every cabinet door was open, groceries had tumbled into the sink—and the pocketbook she had left in the refrigerator was lying open on the countertop! She didn't need to look in it to know that the magazine with the lists was gone.

She stumbled to the counter, feeling sick, and ran her fingers numbly over her purse, trying to think. Someone had managed a hurried search of the galley and had found her pocketbook in the refrigerator. Whoever had done it knew she would be aware the papers were missing and would be doubly careful not to draw suspicion on himself.

Mechanically, she began to straighten up the galley, then reached for the manifest in her pocket. It had to be one of the three latecom-

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ers, Walter Hastings, Andrew Clinton, or August Carlson. Maybe Bill, the first officer, had noticed if any of them didn't follow him through to the flight deck.

The flight was getting rougher. Jen steadied herself against the navigator's table as she went forward. Bill was just leaving his seat in the cockpit. He smiled at her and said, "It was hardly worth dragging those people up for the minute they stood here. The captain got word we're heading into rough weather, so he told me to get them in and out fast. I think I overdid it, though. The last time, I left the men up here and started back to get the four women. We all met in the galley and, believe me, we didn't fit."

Jen turned away without speaking. If Bill had left the men alone, it was useless to question him about who might have dropped back. She would have to depend on herself to find the thief and she had little time to do it. The plane tipped and she steadied herself against the door. She closed her eyes and Dick's face came into her mind—and, in sharper focus, his look when he gave her the magazine: "Remember that carrier that vanished at the end of the Korean War?"

Jen choked back a sob. Dick, she thought, you put your life in danger for those papers. You trusted me with them, and less than an hour after you gave them to me I've lost them. There wouldn't be any headlines for the families of those boys to pore over tomorrow morning and end forever their doubt and despair. She had taken care of that. But she *couldn't* let them down—not Dick, not all those people, not all those boys whose plight, if positively known, might be solved somehow. She had to recover the lists and she had two hours to do it in.

Impatiently, she rubbed the tears from her eyes. Hastings, Clinton, Carlson—she tried to reconstruct her impressions of each man when she had served them cocktails.

Hastings in seat six—tall, thinnish, grey hair, moustache, eyeglasses, about fifty-three. He'd been deep in the financial section of *The Times* and hadn't heard her when she offered the drink. Then he'd laughed and apologized. "Whenever I squeeze in a vacation, I never look at a paper, but the minute I start home I have to begin catching up." Jen recalled her impression that he was the executive type, completely at home on a plane.

Clinton had had a Manhattan. He had thanked her for it and sipped it quickly, saying, "I can use this. I just got word my father

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had a heart attack last night." The scion of the family, Jen decided. Very good-looking in a tanned, blond way, handsomely dressed in a lightweight blue suit and an expensive-looking tie. He looked young, about twenty-five, like an Ivy League graduate who had a station wagon and a Jaguar side by side in his garage.

Carlson, a dark, stocky man about forty-two, seemed ill at ease on the plane and shyly explained he'd been visiting his son who worked in one of the Bermuda hotels.

Jen dug her nails into her fists, thinking they all seemed so right, so typical of what they claimed to be—the businessman, the well-to-do son, the grocery clerk. But one of them was lying—which one?

The cabin door opened and she stepped aside to make room for Allan. He was looking much happier now that the paperwork was finished. "Jen, suppose you work the galley this time and I'll serve the dinners. If you're really serious about that reporter, you might as well get some experience tossing meals together. There's no trick to carrying trays."

Jen debated swiftly. She *had* to serve the dinners. If she spent the next hour or more in the galley, she'd never get a chance to find out who had the magazine. She searched for a plausible excuse to give Allan and could find nothing better than a headache. She rubbed her forehead. "Allan, would you mind awfully taking over the galley? My head is splitting. I'll make it up to you next time we have a flight together."

Allan looked concerned. "Sure, kid. It doesn't matter to *me*. You don't look so hot at that. If you want to lie down in the bunk for a while, I can handle the meal."

"Oh, no—no. I just can't handle the galley. But it's sweet of you to suggest it."

Allan patted her shoulder. "I'm a very accommodating fellow. But, then, I've always had a weakness for brunettes. You know, Jen, newspaper reporters are very undependable fellows. They haven't got half as much to offer as pursers. Or is this speech too late?"

Jen smiled. "It's too late, for one thing, and you don't mean it, for another."

Allan put on his rueful look and Jen knew what was coming. Allan fancied himself a connoisseur of women and a sought-after man about town. She had to get away.

The flight-deck door into the galley opened, saving her. Bill handed in the flight chart. "Here you are, kids. Show the folks where we are."

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Jen grabbed it from him. "I'll bring it around." She darted into the cabin before Allan could stop her. She started with the honeymooners, making the conventional speech. "Perhaps you'd like to see the flight chart. This shows our course, the speed we're flying at, our altitude, the rate of the tailwinds. The X on the chart indicates our present position."

She could have asked them to pass it back to the other passengers when they glanced at it, but instead she waited, every nerve trembling, eager for the moment she would bring it to the three men.

Handing it to Walter Hastings, the middle-aged executive, she studied him anxiously as he looked it over. The only piece of luggage he had brought into the cabin was a briefcase, now lying unzippered at his feet. Some papers from it were on his lap. The magazine with the lists might very well be in the briefcase, but if they were would he be daring enough to have the bag open? Or if he were guilty, was he playing the busy banker plunging back into work? He handed her back the chart with a murmured thank you.

She moved on to Andrew Clinton. He shook his head when she tried to hand him the chart. "No, thanks. I'll take your word for it." He lit a cigarette and offered her one. She refused and he nodded. "That's right. You girls aren't supposed to smoke on duty, are you?" His eyes were blue with little brown spots near the pupil. He *was* attractive, Jen decided, liking the smart cut of his suit, the well creased trousers that had survived the hot Bermuda afternoon, his immaculate white shoes. Once she'd chided Dick about a rumpled suit he was wearing and he'd told her he thought it gave him a boyish appeal.

Jen snapped back to reality. She had to probe this young man somehow, try to get a feeling about him. She remembered his father was supposed to be ill with a heart attack. "You must be terribly concerned about your father."

He nodded. "I keep thinking if I'd paid a little more attention to the business, *he'd* have taken the vacation instead and this wouldn't have happened. But I shouldn't bore you with my troubles."

"You're not boring me at all," Jen replied. "But try not to worry so much. It probably isn't half as bad as the telegram sounded."

She continued down the plane. Another blank, she thought. The solicitous son blaming himself for taking a vacation while his father works himself to death. She glanced back, noticing a small zipper bag, the kind the airline passed out to passengers, in the overhead

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rack at Andrew Clinton's seat. She wondered—if he had the magazine, would he dare put the bag on the rack? She shook her head in despair. He and Hastings both seemed so on the level. Maybe Carlson—

She was before him, offering the flight chart. He was a swarthy man, with a heavy-looking suit and brightly shined shoes. He looked bewildered at the chart, but when she explained he reached for it eagerly. "My son knows all about these things. He works in the Princess Hotel. He's going to be headwaiter there someday." He placed the flight chart on his knees, reached into his pocket, awkwardly drew out an ancient wallet, and produced a picture of a younger edition of himself. "That's how he looks in his uniform."

Jen glanced at the picture. "He looks just like you."

Pride made the little man sit straighter. "That's what everybody says. You know, he sent me the money for this trip. He wrote me a letter"—the letter was produced—" 'Papa, close up the store and come down for two weeks. This place is Paradise.' "

The letter and picture were put away. The flight chart was back in Jen's hand.

Another apparent blank. This passenger had an ancient-looking black bag that stuck out from under his seat. Maybe the lists were concealed there and his uncomfortably proud air was an act—but, more likely, Jen thought, the bag contained inexpensive souvenirs for his friends back home.

She quickly finished passing the chart to the other passengers, then went to the water tank and drew a glass of water. Time was going by. Every turn of the propellers was bringing the plane nearer to New York and she still had no suspicion which of the three men had stolen the magazine. Dick's face haunted her. And all those nameless people whose boys had been on that carrier seemed to be standing around her accusingly.

She wanted to shout, Please, God, help me! She gulped down the water and looked forward. Allan had opened the top half of the galley door, making a serving table of the bottom half for the dinner trays.

Jen went back to the lounge, combed her hair, brightened her lipstick, and washed her hands. She stared in disgust at the smear on her sleeve that the salad in the refrigerator had caused. Then her expression changed from annoyance to fascination, to excitement. She remembered that she'd been very careful to keep her arm well above the salad when she hid the purse—and yet she'd still stained her sleeve. Whoever had searched for her purse had only an

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instant to pull it out and grab the papers. Whoever had done that hadn't time to be careful and might very well have stained his sleeve, too! It was a slim chance, a pitiful hope, but it was the first tangible clue that had been offered her.

Hastings, the banker, had taken his jacket off and folded it under the papers he'd scattered about him. Had there been a reason for that?

Andrew Clinton had offered her a cigarette, with his left hand on the armrest. Was it because he was aware of a stained sleeve that would have been out of place in his trimly elegant appearance?

Carlson had dropped the flight chart on his lap when he dug for his wallet. Wouldn't it have been more natural just to hold it in his hand and reach for the wallet with his other hand?

Jen hurried out of the lounge, clicking the door shut behind her decisively. One way or another, she had to see the bottom part of the jacket sleeves of all three men.

A steaming tray was perched on the bottom part of the galley door. Allan was ready with dinner. She raced up the aisle and grabbed the tray. Allan's bantering humor was gone. He looked up from the oven where he was pulling out sizzling dinners and snapped in a low voice, "For heaven's sake, what's eating you this trip? You know this stuff turns to mush if it gets cold, but you vanish just when I'm ready with dinner."

Jen quickly started passing the trays. When she came to Hastings, the papers were no longer in sight, his briefcase was closed at his seat, and he was wearing his jacket. He reached up both hands for the tray and there was no trace of a stain on either sleeve. He was the well bred executive who'd tidied up for dinner.

Jen was flustered. If her hunch was correct, she could eliminate Hastings from her list of suspects.

Andrew Clinton was next. But when she offered him the tray, he shook his head. "No, thanks," he said. "I couldn't eat a thing." Helplessly, Jen passed the tray to one of the four women, who said, "This looks simply delicious!"

It was Carlson's turn. He reached for his tray with his right hand. Jen could see the underneath part of that sleeve and it was unblemished. She started to turn away, then said, "Oh, dear, I think your coffee spattered. I hope you didn't stain your sleeve." Reaching down, she pulled his left hand up and examined his sleeve closely. Another blank.

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Going forward to the galley, Jen served trays to the crew. If her hunch was right, it had to be Andrew Clinton, Jr., the would-be solicitous son, who'd stolen the papers. She finished with the crew and prepared a small tray with two steaming cups of coffee, a small sugar bowl, and a cream pitcher.

Clinton was staring out the window and turned, startled, when she dropped down beside him. She made her eyes innocent. "I know coffee will make you feel better," she smiled. "And maybe talking to someone will take your mind off things. If you don't object, I'll have my coffee with you."

There was nothing he could do but accept her offer. She noticed that he carefully reached for the coffee with his left hand, sliding his right hand into his lap and refusing cream and sugar. Either he likes it black, she reasoned, or he doesn't want to raise his other hand to get the cream.

She began chattering to him aimlessly. She loved London—had he ever been there? Night flying was always exciting somehow. Then she broke off. "Isn't that a perfectly gorgeous cloud bank?" He looked up as she pointed with the hand that held her coffee. Deliberately, she tilted the cup so that a few drops spilled on his right hand. With a curse, he pulled his hand out of the way, then dropped it on his knee again—but not before Jen had seen the stain on the underneath part of his right sleeve.

I can't let him know that I know. The thought flashed through Jen's mind, warning her that he'd destroy the papers rather than risk carrying them if he was sure she'd traced them to him. She ignored his sleeve, pulled out her handkerchief, and gently patted his hand.

"I'm so terribly sorry." It wasn't hard to stammer the words, make her voice breathless. She glanced at his face. His eyes were angry, calculating, but as she continued apologizing they relaxed and became disarming.

"It's really nothing," he said. "Please don't be so upset."

"You're awfully nice," she said. "I'm all thumbs. Don't hold it against the airline, please."

She started collecting the empty dinner trays on her way forward. The relief at having located the person carrying the papers drained away as she realized the worst was still facing her—how to get them back. The magazine had to be in the small airlines bag in the rack over Clinton's seat.

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Mechanically, she dumped the trays in the galley and came back for more. If Clinton was sure of himself, she might be able to catch him off guard. But how? If Dick were here, he'd know what to do.

Dick—just the thought of his name brought comfort, joy. "In a few days I'll make the conventional speech," he'd said. Would he make that speech if she failed him when he needed her so badly?

She brought the last trays up to the galley. Allan had finished tidying up, was tossing the garbage into refuse bags. "Hey, Jen," he inquired, giving a final wipe to the gleaming counters, "did you do any shopping at the Field? I've got to get the declaration ready for Customs."

"Customs!" Jen clutched at the word. Was there any way she could recover the magazine in Customs? It was the only place Clinton would have to open his bag. How could she work it so he'd be tied up there? She remembered the ring Dick gave her. He must have forgotten that she'd have to declare it. She didn't want Allan to know she had an engagement ring—he'd be sure to tell the crew and she couldn't be bothered with that now.

"I did pick up something," she told him. "Leave me a declaration, will you?"

"Sure thing." Allen pulled one out of his pocket. "But how you can do any shopping two days before payday, I'll never know."

Jen went back to the cabin, sat in the crew seat, and started to fill out the declaration.

"One diamond ring, value—" She stopped, her pen poised. She didn't know what the ring was worth. She had no sales slip for it. She'd probably be in a mess trying to explain it.

An idea began in her mind and made her slowly put the pen away and rip up the declaration. It was a far-fetched chance, a desperate chance, the only chance. She went back to the clothes closet and found a light trenchcoat marked "9." Andrew Clinton's coat. Slowly, she slipped it off the rack.

The buzzer sounded just as she finished. A drink of water for one of the ladies, then another. Allan came back from the galley. "Five minutes to go, Jen. Better start passing out the coats."

She passed them out in a daze, trying to flash her mind ahead. Her timing had to be exact. One hint to Clinton and she'd be sunk. Again she longed fiercely for Dick's presence. He'd be able to handle this so much better. "Jen, darling." If she failed him, would he ever say that again?

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She gave the short boxy coats to the women, a light covert cloth to Hastings, the tan trenchcoat to Andrew Clinton. She stood over him, quickly dropping the coat, folded, on the empty seat beside him. The bag, she noticed, was securely under his arm.

She said, "How's your hand, Mr. Clinton? Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. And you've been very kind. I'm beginning to feel my father will be all right."

"I'm glad. Uncertainty is awful, isn't it?" She bit her lip, knowing her words had double meaning.

The seatbelt sign was flashing. Far below, the lights of New York gleamed brilliantly, their outline familiar and welcoming. Jen turned on the mike.

"Please fasten your seatbelts for the landing and extinguish your cigarettes. We've enjoyed having you aboard. We hope you've had a pleasant flight and we'd love to see you soon again."

She slid into the last seat, Allan beside her. Ten minutes more and she'd have some idea whether the families of those boys would have news about their sons in the morning.

Allan nudged her. "Let's go, kid. And may I say this is the damndest trip I've flown with you? You've been in a fog all afternoon."

He opened the outside door and the sharp April wind blew in, making a memory of the warm Bermuda sun. Jen led the passengers down the ramp and across the field.

The Customs room was bright, bare-looking, and empty except for the tired, bored men behind the desk. They barely glanced at the crew's bags and waved them on. Jen stood back after she handed in a blank declaration, making a production of putting on her coat and hat, delaying her exit.

Hastings was the first passenger to clear. The Customs man opened his bag, patted the clothes in it, and snapped it shut.

Andrew Clinton was next. He gave a side glance to Jen and smiled at the Customs official. "I've only got a change of underwear and my shaving kit. I've been called home because of illness. My bags will follow later."

The inspector unzipped his bag and pulled out the contents. A shaving kit fell onto the counter, followed by the magazine. Jen stared at the magazine. Clinton casually reached his hand to cover it. She had to make her move now.

"Why don't you tell them about the diamond ring in the lining of your overcoat, Mr. Clinton?" she inquired.

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He whirled at her, his face beet-red. "What diamond ring?"

The Customs inspector didn't look bored any more. His eyes pierced Clinton, then sought Jen. She looked at him squarely. "I loaned Mr. Clinton that magazine," she explained. "He didn't care about any we had on the plane. When I went to get it, I noticed him studying a diamond ring. I knew he hadn't declared it and I saw him slit a hole in the pocket of his raincoat with his razor and slip the ring into the lining."

Clinton had raised his hand from the magazine. Jen snatched it as the Customs men restrained him. She turned and fled as she heard one of them say to him, "Look, buddy, don't take it out on the girl—you should know better than to try and beat the duty."

The elevator in the Globe building stopped at the fifth floor. Jen stepped out and was grabbed by the shoulders. A man with iron-grey hair and a ruddy, worry-ridden face was staring at her. "Have you got the list?"

She nodded faintly. He dropped his hands and reached for the magazine as she held it out. "Thank God. Dick's on the phone from Bermuda. He's been holding the line open for the last half hour, worried sick. He says you were definitely followed. Did you have any trouble?"

"Is Dick still on the phone?" Jen asked.

The man pointed to a telephone with the receiver lying on the desk. "Over there." He himself raced to an office boy. "Tell Charlie to reset the first two pages!"

Jen picked up the open receiver weakly, whispering Dick's name. From far away she could hear his answer. "Jen, darling, I've never been so scared in my life. Are you all right?"

"It was pretty bad, but everything's all right, Dick. I gave the lists to your editor."

A thousand miles away she could hear his drawn-out sigh. "Darling," he said, "put on the ring right now. There isn't going to be any conventional speech. I'm not giving you a chance to give it back."

The ring—blue-white prisms of light. Jen felt hot tears on her cheeks. "Dick, I've lost the ring. It was the only way. It was that or the lists."

She felt the phone being taken from her. The editor was speaking into it.

"Hop the next plane back, Dick. We'll all go shopping for a new one."

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The young couple two seats in front of Ben were crying, not hysterically but with a grief that spoke of two lifetimes of hope threatened. A story that reflects how the more things change—including the names of airports—the more they stay the same. Intriguing . . .

SUICIDE MISSION

by TERRY MULLINS

When something like this happens, you look back and say, "I noticed them before we boarded the plane. There was something tense and furtive about them. I was afraid this would happen." But Ben hadn't noticed them. In the forty-minute wait at Kennedy Airport, he had time to examine his fellow passengers. Most of them he dismissed at once as the usual sort on international flights. Only five caused him to wonder—two blond, tanned six-footers he had tagged as Texans or California surfers, a large, intense black man who was traveling alone, and two Japanese carrying impressive-looking briefcases. He hadn't even seen the hijackers. He saw them now. One was holding a knife at the throat of a stewardess. The other was holding a hand grenade in the air and shouting excitedly in broken German for no one to make a move.

Two men Ben hadn't noticed. Now one held the life of the young woman in his hands, the other held the lives of everyone on the plane.

The one with the knife moved the stewardess steadily toward the front of the cabin, his eyes on the closed door to the flight deck. The other moved backward behind him, trying to watch all the passengers at once, brandishing the grenade like a banner. Once he stumbled and the whole plane seemed to gasp.

Mostly the passengers were stunned. A young couple two seats in front of Ben were crying, not hysterically but with a grief that spoke of two lifetimes of hope threatened.

Ben found that except for a very dry throat he seemed to be functioning normally.

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The hijackers reached the flight deck, where the stewardess knocked at the door and called out her name. The passengers were very still. The door opened and Ben could hear the conversation between the co-pilot and the armed men. They wanted to go to Rabat, where there would be six to a dozen others waiting to board the plane. Those would be professionals, Ben thought. These two were probably expendable recruits. If they succeeded, fine—if they didn't, no great loss.

The men who would take over in Rabat would go through the plane and look at everyone's passport. They would pick out the Jews as the first to be killed if anything went wrong or if their demands were not met. Ben thought hard. What would they find in his passport? Benjamin Gold. They would suspect him at once, but they couldn't be sure. Praised be the Puritans who made Hebrew names popular. He was born in Pittsburgh. Good. A lot better than New York. He lived in Cleveland. Also good.

What about visas? Where had he been since his latest passport was issued? Frankfort three times. There was the convention in Sweden, another in Vienna. One in Kyoto. No trips to Israel on this visa—

The man with the knife pushed the stewardess into the pilots' cabin and half disappeared inside. At first the talk was muffled, but then he began shouting. If there was not enough gas to get to Rabat, they must refuel in Portugal! The man with the grenade outside the door facing the passengers looked cautiously over his shoulder from time to time to see how things were going.

For five or ten minutes, the conversation went on. Now they seemed to be saying there was enough gas to get to Morocco. Then the man with the knife released the stewardess and sat down in the cubbyhole beside where the extra baggage was stored.

The man with the grenade, who Ben estimated to be in his late teens, seemed to look on his partner as the leader. He spoke to him—and the man with the knife mumbled something Ben couldn't hear, dropped the knife, and put his head in his hands. His young friend shouted for everyone to stay back and kept asking him what was wrong.

Ben thought he knew. The big danger now was the grenade. If it had been set to go off when released, they might all be killed. The older hijacker tried to put his head between his knees. Instead, he fell and lay prone on the floor. Ben quickly reached under the seat for his bag, then got up and walked calmly toward the two men. The

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younger one flourished the grenade and ordered him back. Ben spoke in careful German, "I'm a physician. Let me help your friend."

The young man looked in panic from Ben to his companion on the floor, scooped up the knife, and nodded at Ben to go ahead. Ben bent over the prostrate man, rolled him onto his back, and loosened his collar. He raised his eyelids. The pupils were dilated. His breathing was becoming heavy and labored. "What did he take?" he asked.

"Cocaine."

"How did he take it?"

"In the men's room at the airport, he used a needle. Half an hour after we took off, we were supposed to act. He just sat there. I told him we must act but he told me to be quiet. Four hours we just sat there! The stuff must have worn off, because he said he needed some more. He said we would sniff it—he wanted me to take some, too. We went in there." He pointed to the toilet. "And we sniffed it."

"He must have taken a big dose."

"Yes. He said we'd need a lot—then we wouldn't care what happened. I didn't like it. I didn't take much. He took some of mine, too. Can you do something for him?"

Ben was kneeling beside the unconscious man, his thoughts half professional, half personal. "Yes, I think I may be able to help him." Ben had his stethoscope out and found the man had a very fast heartbeat. He bared the man's arm and saw numerous puncture scars, wrapped a rubber tube around it, pumped the bulb, and let the air escape slowly. The systolic blood-pressure was up. The man's breathing was becoming more labored.

Ben took out a handkerchief and wiped away the sweat that was trickling into the man's eyes. He looked up at the young hijacker and said, "He'll never make it to Rabat. Tell the pilot to head for the nearest landing field that has a good hospital nearby. Have an ambulance ready and a paramedic crew if possible."

The boy seemed dazed, unable to decide how to act. From behind him the stewardess told Ben, "I'll tell him." She went into the cockpit and a moment later returned and said, "We'll land in Paris. They'll have an ambulance ready."

Ben spoke to the young hijacker. "I'd like to give him sodium amytal but I can't get it into him properly here. I'll have to try nikothamide." He knew the boy couldn't follow what he was saying, but he wanted him to feel someone was in charge. He was used to following. The one he had followed was now helpless and he would look to Ben, the doctor, for direction. As Ben injected the medicine,

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the boy watched in a daze. Ben became aware that the two blond six-footers had come forward and were standing near them. He hoped they weren't going to try anything. They'd never reach Paris if that grenade went off.

To his alarm they came closer and one of them very competently removed the grenade from the young man's hand. The other took the knife.

"We are with airline security," he said in perfect German. "Will he live?"

"I think so," Ben said. "He's suffering from an overdose of cocaine. If he makes it to Paris, he'll have a good chance. Is there some way we could sit him up and get one of those oxygen masks to drop down for him?"

"That won't be necessary. We have a portable oxygen supply here. The stewardess will get it."

The young hijacker was becoming more distraught by the minute. Tears streamed down his face. He was speaking in incoherent wails. One of the security police asked him levelly, "Who is he?" Good, thought Ben. Not "Who are you?" but "Who is he?" Ben caught the word "bruder." That explained a lot. An older and younger brother taking part in the great adventure of their lives, full of religious and patriotic zeal but having to back it up with drugs.

The security men moved passengers out of the front seats, helping them shift their bags, then sat down with the boy between them. Ben saw stewards moving among the passengers with trays of danish and coffee. They took orders for drinks.

Getting everyone to concentrate on food and drink, approved Ben. To forget their near brush with death and that there was still a live grenade somewhere on the plane. That one of the hijackers might die any minute.

He checked the man's pulse.

A quarter of an hour later it was clear that the danger of the hijacker dying had passed. His breathing was more nearly normal. With that a new danger arose. He might wake and become violent. He had set out on a suicide mission. He might resume it at any time.

"He may regain consciousness soon," Ben advised the security men.

They nodded. One of them produced a pair of handcuffs and put them on the older brother. When this brought a protest from his

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younger brother, they handcuffed him as well. There was a stirring among the passengers—they were looking out the windows and pointing. The coast of Europe was in sight.

By the time they landed, Ben's patient was conscious and raving. Ben accompanied the police and their prisoners to the ambulance. The older prisoner was showing surprising vocal strength as he cursed his brother, his tone carrying awful invective.

"Do you understand the language?" Ben asked the security men.

"A little," the one who had rescued the grenade said. He looked grimly at the American doctor. "He is berating his brother for not throwing the grenade."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

GORY RETRIBUTION

by JEAN CONDER SOULE

A mean Marine was Sergeant Gore—
He drilled his troops from dawn till four.
He whipped his men through basic training
And never listened to complaining.
He made them do long K.P. shifts
And even stole their mothers' gifts.
Small wonder, then, that late one night
Someone came to set things right.
An unknown person, so they say,
Aimed a gun in a fatal way,
Fired once, and shot him dead,
Then left the murdered man in bed.
But no one grieves for Sergeant Gore
For he was rotten to the Corps.

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a *NEW* short story by

SCOTT MACKAY

Barbara had always needed a man. And there was something glamorous about an outlaw—a man who, at the beginning, before he was an in-patient, had to have his blood taken while wearing shackles, who had to be examined in clinic with two FBI officers standing guard.

Scott Mackay, whose fiction has appeared in Toronto's Common Ground, The Antigonish Review, The Fiddlehead, *and* Descant, *lives with his wife in Toronto, where he works in the medical-records department of a large downtown hospital . . .*

SHUTTING OUT THE PAIN

by SCOTT MACKAY

She sits with her elbows on her desk, eyes closed, fingers massaging her temples. Try as she might, she can't block out the tinny voice coming from the speaker in her office ceiling.

"Dr. Barbara Baker, please call Locating."

Because she has taken fifteen milligrams of morphine, the voice echoes, then slowly fades. The pain in her back isn't so bad now. She drifts. Shattered glass, flashing lights, the pavement wet and slippery, and David, husband of five years, lying dead there next to her, hanging upside down from his seatbelt. Her back. The seatbelt has done something to her back.

"Dr. Barbara Baker, please call Locating."

She opens her eyes. It's seven o'clock. Most of the doctors have gone home and only the young residents like herself are left here for the night. She lifts the telephone and dials Locating. They tell her she is to call Five Center immediately. She calls Five Center.

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"Dr. Baker?" says the nurse on duty. It's Sandy, one of the young reliefs.

"Yes?"

"This is Sandy on the fifth floor. I think you'd better come." She sounds scared, confused. "Mr. Johannsen is dead."

"Dead?" she says, and the word reverberates through her silent office like the low steady beat of a timpani. For a moment she sees Tim Johannsen reaching for her thigh, trying to bend her over, but she doesn't want to, she doesn't want to, she is a shy woman. She remembers the day they first brought him here in shackles, two FBI officers on either side.

"Dr. Baker, are you still there?" says Sandy.

"Yes," she says, and she feels out of breath, as if the life has been sucked out of her. "Yes, I'll be right up. Call some porters, please."

"Yes, Dr. Baker."

Dr. Baker stands with great effort, as if a thick gel is surrounding her body, hampering her movements. It's well over eighty outside—a hot, humid July night—but inside they have the air-conditioning turned up high. She looks at the photograph of David on her desk. He was, she thinks, a handsome man, but a man who assumed too much, a man who believed she wasn't serious about medicine and whose appetites sometimes disgusted her. Why did men have to be so disgusting? Still, she loved David in her way, though whether she knows what love is has always puzzled her.

She pulls on her white labcoat and leaves the medical oncology suite. As she walks to the elevators her dreaminess lifts and she feels clear-headed. There is only a minor ache in her back. She feels as if she has everything under control. Yet she knows she is hopelessly out of control, that ghosts are everywhere, that they make her do things she wouldn't otherwise do. She sees her uncle's hand reaching for her. Her uncle is a ghoul. Under control. No, not under control, out of control. The hallway is empty and she hits the up button for the elevator with an agitated thump of her palm.

John Secure would be there, watching, knowing she changed Tim Johannsen's prescription. One hundred milligrams to six hundred milligrams. Secure is Tim Johannsen's roommate and Dr. Baker's newest—not disgusting, a courtly pursuer who doesn't push too fast, who realizes she has memories she would sooner forget. "John Secure" is a medical-records pseudonym, a confidentiality measure, for Dr. Michael Alexander, one of the young doctors in the Radiation

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Oncology Department, who has the misfortune to have carcinoma of the brain.

Sandy is waiting for her at the Five Center nursing station. The floor is quiet, between shifts. Sandy is no more than twenty-five, wears a pink nurse's uniform, is scared because this is her first death.

"When did it happen?" asks Dr. Baker in a firm, confident voice. It is a sham. She has been living a sham ever since the night she steered the car into the guardrail with David in the passenger seat.

"Dr. Alexander says around six-fifteen."

She walks down the hallway with Sandy at her side. Phenolchlorizide. A new drug. Experimental. Used only in clinical trials when to the best of the physician's judgment everything else has failed. Said to be on the cutting edge of chemotherapy. The hard reflective floors echo their footsteps as they pass laundry hampers, sample refrigerators, and supply cabinets.

She has always needed a man. And there's something glamorous about an outlaw—a man who, at the beginning, before he was an in-patient, had to have his blood taken while wearing shackles, who had to be examined in clinic with two FBI officers standing guard. Was it rebound from David? She doesn't know. Someday when she gets off this stuff, when her back is better, she'll try to figure that one out.

Two porters are waiting in the room. There is no doubt about it. He's dead. Nor does she have any doubt that an autopsy will show cause of death to be adverse reaction to chemotherapy treatments, notably phenolchlorizide.

Dr. Michael Alexander, alias John Secure, lies in the bed nearest the window, head propped on his hand, watching her. Her face feels like lead. He knows what she has done, that she has killed this patient with chemotherapy. She feels desperate, as if she needs more morphine. He has the same unrevealing face always. She can't help thinking he'll say something to someone. He is losing his battle against cancer and he knows it. He also knows there has been legitimate talk of offering him clinical trials.

She approaches Tim Johannsen. Already he is stiff with rigor mortis. He has lost over eighty pounds, most of his hair has fallen out, his fingernails are yellow and hard, and his eyes are partially open. The trim muscles have gone slack and the bronze color has drained from his face. She looks at his left hand. It reminds her of

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her uncle's left hand. They were both left-handed. She wants to burn that left hand. She never meant this, never meant to kill, just meant to warn, just as she had meant to warn David.

She lifts her head and nods at the porters. They put the body onto a stretcher and take it down to the morgue, where she will give it a cursory examination and fill out the certificate of death. This isn't normal procedure—usually the certificate of death is filled out in the room—but she needs to talk to Michael Alexander. She looks at him. He's around thirty-five, a little older than she is, and has been on staff for just over a year. He holds her gaze, then turns away. His arm shakes and he lies down on his side.

"Well, what do you want me to say?" he says.

He speaks with the irritating voice of the chronically ill. Dr. Baker turns to Sandy and dismisses her. The nurse leaves the room and she and John Secure are left alone.

"I don't want you to say anything," she answers. "Or if you have something to say, please go ahead and say it because I'd like to hear it."

For a moment he doesn't answer. He is sick, she sees. He is in pain.

"Oh, come on, Barbara." His voice is breathless. "Six hundred milligrams of phenolchlorizide? Who are you trying to kid?"

"I'm not trying to kid anybody. I thought the phenolchlorizide would work."

"Oh, it worked all right." He groans as a wave of nausea passes through his body.

"The committee recommended a hundred milligrams," he says, catching his breath. "You gave him six hundred surreptitiously and against all orders. I don't care how pure your motives were, it still amounts to malpractice, possibly murder."

He lies over on his back, thin, emaciated. He wouldn't understand. He couldn't know about her uncle.

"I gave him six hundred because I honestly didn't think a hundred would work."

"I don't know about you, Barbara. What was going on between you and Johannsen before we met?"

She feels like screaming. She is back in the van. Tim grabs her underwear with his left hand while he pushes her skirt up with his right. It was time for the pokies out in the hospital parking lot in his van, one year to the day David lay hanging from his seatbelt. She is a shy woman. This is something Michael will never under-

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stand. It was something her uncle and Tim Johannsen had never understood. She thinks of Johannsen's left hand, with the skull-and-crossbones ring.

"Michael, I think that's my business, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't raise a fuss about it."

"I'll have to tell them about the change of prescription."

"Michael, please don't do that. If I mean anything to you at all, please don't do that."

This softens him. She talks the language of love, and for a man near death this is music. He looks at her, eyes wide and dim, mouth slightly open.

"Do you have anything for the pain?" he asks.

"Are you hurting?"

"Yes."

She walks up to him and rubs his chest. He groans, moves his shoulders. He knows he is bad. He knows she will be the last woman ever to rub his chest.

She pulls out her bottle of morphine capsules. "You can always take one of these."

Downstairs in the morgue she examines Johannsen's corpse more closely. He has been stripped and has a tag tied around his big toe. The phenolchlorizide has burned the life out of him. She knew it would make him sick, but she didn't know it would kill him. She pulls the sheet aside and gazes at his face for a long time, a narrow face with no hair, the fast-growing protein cells sizzled away by the strong prescription. But still rugged-looking, like a country-and-western singer who has seen too many one-night stands. She smiles. Pokie, pokie. She hadn't meant this. She hadn't wanted this to happen.

But she hadn't wanted her parents to die in a boating accident when she had been barely ten. Nor had she wanted to live with her uncle, but she'd had no choice. As she leaves the morgue, she needs a cigarette. There is no smoking in the hospital so she must go outside. She leaves the hospital through the ambulance holding area.

Outside, the sky is dim, pink, heavy with humidity. The air thick with the smell of nearby traffic. There are so many things she hasn't wanted, yet to practice medicine is one of the things she did want, something she has worked hard for, something that enabled her to leave her uncle. She pulls out her Salems, sticks one between her

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lips, but hesitates with her lighter. What is she going to do about John Secure? How much influence does he have? And does she actually love John Secure/Michael Alexander?

She lights her cigarette, pulls on it, and inhales deeply. The ghoul is out tonight. She can feel her uncle all around her. She can feel the rottenness in her life. She can feel Tim Johannsen's fingers probing, can hear his heavy breathing and smell the mediciny odor of his breath as they struggle in the back of his van, some Nashville favorite whining away on the cassette deck.

She takes another deep pull on the Salem and walks down the block to the corner store. Though the night is hot, it is balmy and the steamy wind billows the leaves of the black locusts and maples that line the street. She is stoned. There is no other word for it. She feels it would be an easy thing to spread her legs for anybody right now. The death of Tim Johannsen has aroused her. Just as the death of her husband had.

At the corner store she buys a Diet Pepsi, goes back into the hot night, snaps the can open, and washes another fifteen milligrams of morphine down her throat. There, that's better. Now she has things under control. As a doctor, she must have things under control. And if the ghosts come, she has to shut them out, just as she has to shut out the pain and all the things she has never wanted. She must remember that she is first and foremost a doctor—that is the most important thing in the world to her and she could never do anything else.

The morphine eases into her body. Soon all is painless, all is under control. She stubs out her cigarette and takes her Diet Pepsi up to her office. There, the photograph of David stares at her, but she is past caring. She knows what she has to do. Her medical career must not suffer.

She turns on her computer and, after entering her access code, types Michael Alexander's hospital number. The central patient index lights up. John Secure. T-204419. Carcinoma-Bra. She reads over his progress notes carefully. He has gone from eighty to forty on the Karnofsky scale. In other words, he is severely disabled, hospitalization is indicated, though death is not imminent. She boots up the clinical pathology and diagnostic reports, reads and rereads the only operative report, where a tumor the size of a golfball has been removed from the upper left quadrant of his brain.

She shivers as the central air-conditioning comes on again. In

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view of all this distressing evidence, she will have to recommend to the board tomorrow that Michael Alexander be put on clinical trials. This new drug, chloropathoxin, might be just the thing. With numb calculation she writes out the prescription. This might be just the thing to fix John Secure.

ON OUR COVER

Where Are the Children, A Stranger Is Watching, The Cradle Will Fall, A Cry in the Night, Stillwatch, Weep No More, My Lady—these six bestselling novels of often unbearable suspense by Mary Higgins Clark have all been made into films. They are available in hardcover from Simon & Schuster and in paperback from Dell.

In May 1988, Simon & Schuster signed a record-breaking contract with Mary Higgins Clark for four novels and a collection of short stories, *The Anastasia Syndrome.* The first novel under the new contract, *While My Pretty One Sleeps,* was published in May and will be available in paperback from Pocket Books. Available in Simon & Schuster audiocassettes are *Weep No More, My Lady* (featuring Elizabeth Ashley) and *While My Pretty One Sleeps* (featuring Jessica Walter)—and Michael Viner's Audio Productions have contracted for *The Cradle Will Fall, A Cry in the Night,* and *Stillwatch,* to be narrated by the author's daughter, actress Carol Higgins Clark.

In a 1980 interview in *EQMM,* Mary Higgins Clark said, "I like to think of my books as jigsaw puzzles. Every character has a piece of the puzzle in his or her hand. If they would only open their hands, show what they have, reveal what they know, the mystery would be solved. Life is much like that: happenstance, the missed bus, the coincidence. I go to a lot of trials and see evidence of this all the time."

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A *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Last year, expressing concern over their daughter's weight, Davey and Rose Miller made Mitzi an offer. They promised to pay her $50,000 if she would take off fifty pounds. They had previously refused to advance Mitzi any money, even though they could afford it. "A classic case of parental sadism," she had said at the time. "They know I can't do it."

William Bankier's 109th story in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. . . *!*

THE FIFTY-POUND RIPOFF

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"Cut it out, Mitzi," Ed Culkin said to his wife.

"Where are the scissors?"

"I can't stand this."

"Try sitting down."

"You're driving me out of my mind."

"That's not a drive—it's a three-foot putt." Mitzi approached Ed from behind. She wrapped her arms around him and peered across his shoulder at the brick wall outside their living-room window. "Forgive me, Ed. The job is making me crazy." Mitzi was a freelance gag-writer for a company called Ovation. They produced greeting cards, coffee mugs, statuettes, stuffed animals, and other novelties, and she created humorous captions for many of them.

"I thought when you stopped going to the office and started working at home it would get better."

"Stricken with the joker's curse," Mitzi intoned, "her efforts went from bad to verse."

Culkin turned and drew his wife close. Mitzi weighing 195 pounds,

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this required the full extension of his arms. "You need a vacation. So do I. I require at least three weeks away from the shoe business." Ed represented the Quiet Corgi Shoe Company.

"We spend every penny we earn," Mitzi reminded him. "What would we use for vacation money?"

"That's my fault. I thought by this time I'd have gotten in to see Sam Fetish." For over a year, Ed had been trying to get the Corgi line into the Foot Fetish chain of shops in malls all over the state.

"I'm the one who should feel guilty," Mitzi said. She went to the kitchen and came back with a fistful of peanut-butter cookies. "Want?"

"Don't want." In his forties, the shoe salesman was working hard to stay in shape.

Mitzi said, "Remember the offer of fifty thousand dollars from the borough beasties? I spoke to Mother on the telephone a few days ago. It still stands."

"Don't punish yourself for not attempting the impossible."

"The impossible is inconceivable," Mitzi said. She took up a pencil and scribbled her remark on a pad. "Even so, I wish I could take advantage of their bribe."

Last year, expressing concern over their daughter's weight, Davey and Rose Miller made Mitzi an offer. They promised to pay her $50,000 if she would take off fifty pounds. The Millers had previously refused to advance Mitzi any money, even though they could afford it. "A classic case of parental sadism," she had said at the time. "They know I can't do it." Still, for about a week she'd given it the old kindergarten try, dropping four pounds, then putting on six. The windfall was gone with the wind.

Ed inserted all ten fingers in his wife's close-cropped hair and massaged her scalp. "Sweet, soft, adorable woman. You are who you are. You can't be somebody else."

Mitzi peered up at her husband through half closed eyes. "Why can't I?"

"What?"

"Be somebody else."

"You've lost me."

Mitzi located a shoe and began searching for the other one. "Suit up," she said. "We're going to drive to Skyborough and drop in on the borough beasties. The campaign to claim our vacation money is about to begin."

Ed climbed into his visiting-the-old-people jacket, the tweed one

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with the leather elbow-patches, and picked up his car keys. "We tried before and we failed," he said.

"But now I have my brilliant idea." Mitzi peered into the oak-framed mirror by the front door. "I am about to be weighed in the balance and found wanting," she said.

"Wanting all that money," they said in unison and shoved each other out the door.

The rambling house on its generous lot in Skyborough, ten miles west of Metrola, was worth a small fortune in a rising real-estate market. Davey and Rose Miller had bought the place decades ago when property was cheap in the suburbs. Davey had worked a full career as a land speculator and developer. An only child, Mitzi had experienced a season of rebellion. She joined protest marches, left home, slept rough at times, and took on board sufficient quantities of illegal substances to establish that they were not for her. During these years, her parents put up continuous resistance to Mitzi's escapades, so that low-key hostility became a habit and their daughter named them the borough beasties. "They're so self-centered they don't see or hear anyone but themselves," she'd once told Ed.

"Davey's really losing it," she said now as he parked the car beside her childhood home. Once the shrubs fronting the house had been neatly trimmed. Today they grew in untidy profusion. Dried leaves rustled on the front walk as the two approached the front door. "He refuses to admit he can't look after the yard. And he won't hire anybody."

"He's proud."

"He's nuts."

Mitzi used her key to unlock the door, striding inside as if she'd gone out ten minutes ago for a loaf of bread. "Where *is* everybody?" she called.

Rose and Davey were at the kitchen table, drinking tea and playing gin rummy. Each held their cards like a jeweler appraising a stone, frowning through glasses with old-fashioned frames. "We're here," Mitzi announced. She stood first behind her mother and then behind her father. "Mom, you've got fourteen cards. Dad, you have only eight. Why don't you invest in proper glasses? You can afford it."

Neither Davey's feet nor Rose's touched the floor. Davey sat very straight, bald head gleaming, face made to look sad by a drooping

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grey moustache. Rose held a lace handkerchief near her lips. "Where's your husband?" she demanded.

"I'm right here," Ed said.

"I've decided to have another go at your offer," Mitzi announced. "Fifty pounds, fifty grand. This time I intend to succeed."

Ed was sent to bring the bathroom scales into the kitchen. Mitzi climbed aboard and produced a reading of 196.

"The present Mitzi is history," she said. "I go now to a life of controlled starvation. When I return, I shall appear as a one-hundred-and-forty-five-pound miniature of the person you see before you. Or would see, if you could see."

"She never talks like other people," Rose said.

Davey said, "That makes three in the past month."

"Three what?" his daughter asked.

"Break-ins on this street. Some hooligan is cleaning out the neighborhood." He shrugged. "Never grow old," he whispered.

"Call the police," Mitzi told him. "Demand a regular patrol!"

"Quiet," the old man said. "You're always scaring your mother."

"What's he talking about now?" Rose asked.

"We have to go," Mitzi said gently. For her.

In the car cruising back to Metrola, she said, "Can you believe those scrambled minds were once like steel traps? And here I am, about to take advantage of them."

Culkin said, "I can't see how you'll take off the weight this time when you weren't able to before."

"Who said I'm taking off any weight?" Mitzi opened the glove compartment and found her bag of car mints.

"You did."

"I gave that impression. But here's what is really happening. As soon as I get home, I'm calling my friend, Zora Aster."

Ed's face brightened. "The enterprising actress?"

Mitzi nodded. "Why should I suffer?" she said. "Zora already carries exactly the weight I need."

"Five hundred?" Zora said. She was obediently standing in the open doorway of Mitzi's apartment, blowing her cigarette smoke into the great outdoors. "You'll pay me five hundred dollars for half an hour's work?"

Ed was looking doubtful. "If it works. But it can't. Not even the borough beasties are that blind."

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"They never look at me," Mitzi said. "They listen to my voice, but they seldom hear anything I say. Unless it's abusive or obscene. Throw that butt away, Zora. Rest yours on this chair. My folks have offered to pay me to lose weight." She ran through the details of the offer, explaining how she had tried once and failed to lose an ounce. "As I recall, my dear, you weigh one-forty-seven," she concluded.

"I'm down to one-forty-five."

"Even better. So here's what we do. We let a month go by. I announce to the beasties by telephone that I've reached the magic number and to please get the check ready. Then Ed loads you into the car and you drive across to Skyborough where this comparatively slim creature steps on and off the scales. Ed collects the check and you flee like the bandits you are."

Zora screamed, loving this. "But they'll know it's not you."

"No, they won't. You'll be wearing my black wig. And you'll have on my old sunglasses, the ones with the red-plastic frames given to me by the beasties."

"But if I speak— I can't do your voice. Not enough to fool them."

Mitzi opened a drawer and took out a miniature tape-recorder. "This puts out high-fidelity reproduction. I'll record a half hour of talk. They're accustomed to me going on and on. Ed will be with you to fill in the silences. I'll prepare a script for you. He'll answer for me if they ask a direct question."

Culkin decided to try a little optimism. "It might work."

"And Ed will set it up," Mitzi said, "by informing them that the quick weight-loss has turned me frantic, that I go on talking jags and not to worry about it."

During the month in which Mitzi was supposed to be taking off the weight, Ed almost made his connection with Sam Fetish. He drove one day to the district on the west side of Metrola where Fetish had his main shop and head office in the Blessa Mall. He spent twenty minutes in the Foot Fetish outlet on the fifth floor, purchasing a pair of the competition's training shoes. His own Quiet Corgi line was not, of course, in stock. His breezy request to see the boss was met with the standard rebuff: "Mr. Fetish can't see you without an appointment." No use saying his many applications for an appointment had all been turned down.

Ed was drinking coffee at a counter within sight of the shop when a young man with a blond crewcut came racing out of the store's back office holding a paper bag in one hand and what looked like

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an automatic pistol in the other. Whatever brand of shoes the youth was wearing, they had wings on their heels—he was gone down the escalator and into the crowds on the lower level before Sam Fetish made it out of his office.

The old man stood on the concourse screaming, "Security!" A guard came running and Fetish babbled a description. As the officer took off, Culkin indulged himself with an imaginary conversation. He said, Sir, how would you like to stock a line of shoes that will earn back in one month all the money you just lost in this robbery? In the fantasy, the shop-owner replied, How would you like to go to Alaska and sell beach-thongs to the Eskimos?

At least I laid eyes on the man, Culkin told himself. That's progress.

In the weeks she was supposedly dieting, Mitzi completed a couple of assignments for Ovation. She captioned a line of gift pillows for people suffering from insomnia. "Now I lay me down to sheep," one of them said. She also invented a new stuffed toy. It was a furry bear perched on a bathroom scales. She called it Diet Koala.

In a weekly status-report by telephone, she told the borough beasties that the weight was coming off—down fifteen and counting. She also kept tabs on her friend. "Take good care of yourself," she sang to Zora, "you belong to me."

When the month was up, Mitzi warned her parents that she and her husband were on their way in a chauffered car that afternoon.

In the non-chauffered car on the drive to Skyborough, Zora kept testing the tape machine—mounted in a harness below her bosom, masked by a frilly blouse.

"Turn that thing off," Mitzi snapped. She was riding beside Culkin, who was at the wheel. "I can't stand the sound of my voice."

"How are they going to believe you took off fifty pounds in a month?" the actress wanted to know from the back seat.

"They've already been told—they already believe. The weigh-in is only confirmation."

Ed explained. "It's the money. The beasties have always believed cash is like rainfall. Small sums irrigate projects. Large amounts wash away problems."

"They can't take it with them," Mitzi grumbled, "so they're thinking about having it sent on ahead."

When Ed and Zora got out of the car, Mitzi slipped behind the wheel and drove around the block to wait out of sight on the next

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street. Ed would explain that the driver had gone off for coffee and they would join him later—the walk part of Mitzi's new attitude toward fitness. As they approached the door, Ed did what he could to encourage the panicky Zora. "With the wig and the glasses, you look just like Mitzi."

"It's the tape I'm worried about. What if I have a mechanical breakdown?"

He rang the doorbell. When he heard movement on the other side, he said, "Start up."

Zora accidentally pressed the fast-forward button. A high-pitched, staccato chatter poured from her bosom. She cursed, hit rewind, and was coughing and clutching her chest when Davey opened the door.

"Here she is, as advertised." Ed led the way inside. "The new Mitzi Culkin!"

Mitzi's taped monologue took over. "Boy, am I glad to be here. The house looks bigger. Maybe that's because my eyes are smaller. I have trouble sleeping because my eyelids are no longer heavy. Ed, get the scales and let's do this thing."

As Culkin hurried from the room, the chatter went on. "I don't want you to think this was easy just because it was fast. You know what did it? Baby foods. One of those little jars for each meal. Nine months and I'd have been down to eight and a half pounds."

"Listen to her," Rose said. "We have the living room redecorated and she doesn't even notice."

Ed was back with the scales. "She loves it, don't you, Mitzi? Of course she does." Mitzi's voice never stopped. "Here, let's get the official weigh-in." Zora stood on the scales and Culkin edged closer for the reading.

"Hey, one forty-five on the nose." He led an impromptu round of applause as Mitzi's monologue continued.

"I can't promise to keep the weight off. I hope to, but I can't be sure. Anyway, I want to thank you for a gruesome experience."

"How about a cup of tea?" Rose offered. "And some of my deep-dish cheesecake with black cherries in syrup?"

Davey added, "We have lo-fat milk for your tea, Mitzi."

"I don't know," Culkin tried to hedge. "She's feeling hyper. I thought I'd just take her home and put her to bed with a glass of diet brandy."

Sitting in the car on the next street, Mitzi watched the house and

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wondered how things were going inside. Ed would be cool. Unless Zora fainted from nerves, it should be okay.

Somebody was on the patio at the back of the house. It was a tall lean figure dressed in black. The head seemed to be covered with a close-fitting cap. A gardener? Some sort of maintenance man? No, he was hoisting himself up to the open window of Mitzi's bedroom! His leg was over the sill—he was crouching to slip inside!

Rage boiled up and eclipsed Mitzi's common sense. This must be the thief who had been knocking over the neighborhood residences. Now he was in her former bedroom, desecrating the house in which she had grown up, threatening those defenseless coots inside! In an instant, she was out of the car and running across the back lawn.

The window was still open. Mitzi crawled through into the familiar surroundings—pink bedspread, mirror by the door, cherrywood dresser where the intruder was going through the top drawer. He turned and she was on him like a tigress. He was the taller, but she outweighed him. Her rage was such that only later would broken fingernails remind her of the ferocity of her attack. Luckily for both of them, he wasn't armed.

They were wrestling on the floor when the door opened and Ed stepped into the room. "What the hell?"

"Help me! Hold him! I saw him come in through the window!"

"We couldn't imagine what the noise was." Together, the Culkins stood the housebreaker up and forced him against the wall. "I'll have to tell Davey and Rose something," Ed said.

"Say stray cats. What's Zora doing?"

"Avoiding Rose's cheesecake. She can't eat with the tape still playing and she's afraid to switch it off. I'd better get back." Ed started for the door.

"What about this one?"

"Let him go. We can't call the police—Zora will be trapped with nothing to say."

"I'm not letting him go. I'm making a citizen's arrest."

Culkin couldn't help, he was needed back in the kitchen. "Leave him to me," Mitzi said. With the intruder's arm in a hammerlock, she forced him back out the open window.

"You can't drive," Culkin called softly after her. "He'd have to be tied up."

"I'm taking him on foot," Mitzi said. "The police station is only ten minutes from here." To her prisoner she muttered, "Give me any trouble and I'll break your arm."

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He remained docile until they arrived at the main door of the police station. Then, as Mitzi reached for the door handle, he spun away from her, swinging his free elbow, catching her on the jaw. Her teeth clashed. Lights flashed before her eyes. She released her grip and the youth began to run. But not far. Two cops were getting out of a cruiser at the curb. Witnessing the action, they headed off the culprit and soon had him under control.

Mitzi could hardly talk, the pain was so intense. "Sizzen's 'rest," she said.

When Culkin, with Zora in tow, tracked his wife to the emergency clinic at Skyborough General Hospital, they were taking her in to have her jaw wired. Pain medication had relaxed her considerably. In erratic handwriting on a pad, she brought them up to date. Ed was able to cheer her by showing her the check.

"And don't worry about my five hundred," Zora said. "You can pay me tomorrow."

Mitzi was released from the hospital two days later. Ed brought her home. The swelling was down, but speech would remain difficult. She was still writing notes. One of the first said, "I can only drink liquids through a straw. Know what that means?"

"You're going to lose weight."

Mitzi wrote long enough to explain that she didn't want to worry her folks with any of this story. They'd insist on visiting her and would find her heavy, days after apparently weighing in at 145. And it might lead to their connecting her with the heroine of the arrest in Skyborough. All too complicated for words—which Mitzi presently could not utter.

"Then let's go on that vacation," Culkin said. "I've cashed the check. We're in funds."

The Metrola winter was coming on and Mitzi was persuaded to fly to the sun. She couldn't enjoy the lavish restaurant food, but she could bask. And as the weeks of liquid diet took effect, she bought two new bathing suits, each one a size smaller.

When the Culkins journeyed home, Mitzi kept an appointment at the clinic. All was well and the wire came out. Her lower jaw could open again. Standing before a mirror at home, she said, "I'm ambivalent about that thief. He really hurt me. But the guy was desperate, he was trying not to go to prison. I don't think he meant to break my jaw."

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She was wearing one of her new outfits, purchased on vacation. She admired herself full length, then she moved into the bathroom and got on the scales, confirming what they already knew. "And here I stand, the real Mitzi Culkin. A hundred and sixty isn't bad."

The telephone rang and Ed answered. He listened more than he spoke. When the call was finished, he rejoined Mitzi with an expression of triumph on his face. She said, "You look like you just cashed another big check."

"That was our detective friend, the one who followed up on your citizen's arrest. Seems the thief confessed a whole series of crimes—including a holdup in the Foot Fetish shop at the Blessa Mall."

"The one you saw?"

He nodded. "I'll be telephoning Sam Fetish in the morning. This time he'll see me."

"You'll tell him it was your wife who nabbed the robber."

"And I bet he ends up offering the entire Quiet Corgi line in every one of his stores." Culkin cracked a knuckle.

Mitzi's eyes were focused far away. "Money attracts money," she said.

"Meaning what?"

"If the beasties paid fifty grand when I lost fifty pounds, I wonder what they'll offer me to drop another thirty?"

"Wait a minute," Culkin protested. "You've already lost enough weight."

"Nobody's losing anything," Mitzi said. She picked up the telephone. "I'm going to talk to Zora. She must know some hungry actress who weighs a hundred and fifteen."

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"You wouldn't believe the things that get thrown at women these days," Liz told Ian. "I've had to listen to stories that would curl your toes, just because I'm polite."

"Oh, you're polite, all right," he said . . .

MOVING FORWARD

by J. W. WHITEHEAD

"I have this gift, Liz," he said to her. They were in bed, the window open. Cooling off.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. I thought it was time you should know. I thought you should know before we got too serious."

"Too serious? We've only known each other a few weeks. I mean, I like you, and I think things are going great, but—"

"I'm just trying to be fair."

"Well, what is it, anyway? Hey, is this something sexual?"

"Is what something sexual?"

"This gift of yours. This isn't one of those things where it's actually disgusting and they call it a 'gift' so you can live with it?"

"What a sensitive way of putting it."

"Now, Ian, come on, don't get bent out of shape. You wouldn't believe the kinds of things that get thrown at a woman these days—right out of the blue. I've had to listen to stories that would curl your toes, just because I'm polite."

"Oh, you're polite, all right."

"Want to smoke?"

"Why not?"

She leaned over the side of the bed and pulled a number out of her purse. She lit it and they passed it back and forth a few times until he lost interest. "So are you getting serious?" she said.

"I didn't say that."

"Listen, that's a bad word for most men. You don't have to be ashamed of that word. I think it's kind of nice. I think it's kind of nice that you would use a word like that."

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"I didn't mean anything by it."

"Then what's on your mind? Can't we just relax and enjoy ourselves? Can't we just spend a minute not moving forward?"

"That's the problem," he said.

"What's the problem?"

"That. What you said. About moving forward. About wanting to spend a minute not moving forward."

"Well, what about it?"

"We don't have a choice. We're always moving forward."

She squeezed off the lit end of the number and fumbled it back into her purse. "That's what I mean," she said. "What is it with you? I mean, why are you always putting this huge ticking clock over our heads? I say we're not moving forward unless we both agree we're moving forward. And right now at this moment in time I'd say we're moving more backward than forward."

"You don't get it. You said the clock, right? Like there's a huge ticking clock over our heads. Well, I didn't put it there. And you can't stop it. We're always moving into the future. No matter what's waiting there, you can't throw on the brakes. You think I don't wish I could throw on the brakes?"

"There. That's it. You never spend a minute in the present. Well, a couple of minutes ago you were doing all right with the present, but then it was over and we had to start talking again. Maybe we just shouldn't talk."

"Okay, fine, if that's the way you feel about it." He got up and pulled on his shorts, saying, "You try and tell something important to someone you care about—"

"Go on. Don't let me stop you."

"No, that's all. Do you think I *like* to talk about it? Do you think I'd talk about it if I had a choice?"

He realized he'd raised his voice and he stopped talking. That was what happened the other time: he just got more and more excited, and before he knew it it was too late. He'd seen it coming, but it was still too late.

She crawled across the mattress and pulled him gently down onto the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry," she said. "What's this all about?"

"It's that I have this gift."

"The gift. Right. What is the gift?"

"Can I trust you?"

"Of course you can trust me."

"I can foresee the future."

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"Oh, Ian, come on. I like you. Don't turn out to be a crackpot."

"I'm serious. I see things. I dream them, and then they happen."

"For instance?"

"You don't believe me."

"No, no—I do believe you, but it's probably just deja vu or something. Like you have the feeling that you just know what a person's going to say next, and then they say it, because it's like you had the conversation before? I know that feeling. You don't have to feel weird about it. Lots of people know it."

"It's not like that."

"No? Well, then, what's it like?"

"One time," he said, "I dreamed I saw a man pull a famous painting off a wall and throw a black shroud over it."

"And what happened then? Did the artist die? I've got you there. A painting's never famous until the artist is dead."

"No," he said. "The painting was stolen. Two days later. I'd never seen the painting before, but they ran pictures of it on the evening news and in the newspapers. It was the one I'd seen in my dream."

"Oh, Ian. Did you tell anyone about it?"

"Yes. My girl friend. My girl friend at the time. But she didn't believe me. She said I was acting creepy, and that if I wouldn't admit I was kidding she didn't have any time for me."

"And you didn't admit you were kidding even then?"

"I *wasn't* kidding, Liz."

"She was right. You *are* acting creepy."

"So you don't believe me, either."

"It was a coincidence," she said. "Deja vu in reverse. Don't read so much into it. Do you think you're special or something?"

"I've seen people die," he went on. "I've seen them die, and it never fails to come true. Hit by trains, crushed by cars, shootings—"

"You need to talk to someone," she said. She was up, pulling on her shirt, slipping into her pants.

"I am talking to someone," he said.

"I mean someone else."

"Like who? A shrink?"

"So anyway, Ian, did your girl friend finally leave you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think she did."

"Well, you're wrong," he said. "I got mad. I ended the relationship. Because she wouldn't listen."

"I can't say I blame her," she said. She gave him a quick kiss on

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the cheek as she headed for the door. "Call me when you get this thing straightened out," she said. "You're really a sweet guy underneath."

"Wait," he said. "Please wait."

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry. Don't leave. I know it's a lot to handle all at once. It wasn't fair."

"You're right. It was creepy."

"Just don't leave."

She came over and cradled his head between her breasts. "It's all right," she said. "That coincidence thing can be a drag. It can get scary."

"Stay," he said.

She undressed and climbed back into bed. "Tomorrow we'll go to the beach like we planned."

"That's fine." It was the last thing he said before they fell asleep. That night he dreamed he saw a girl drown.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

A MOUSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

by RUTH P. SHIELDS

'Tis a tale of woe, not of mirth,
About Tom who'd been timid since birth.
His spouse did him in—
She said, "It's no sin,
For the meek shall inherit the earth."

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a *NEW* short story by

H. H. MORRIS

The sheriff had taken an oath to keep the peace, and if peace was likely to take a battering anywhere it was Jug's bar when one or more Hemphills entered it. They'd grown up on the stuff they made themselves, so the Hemphills couldn't handle any healthy brew without turning even meaner than normal . . .

BORN AGAIN

by H. H. MORRIS

The pickup had come off a General Motors assembly line when Harry Truman was President. Most likely it had been some shade of blue. Now it looked like the car in the Johnny Cash song about the guy who spent several years swiping all the parts from the factory. Somewhere on the body or under the hood was a piece or part representing just about every manufacturer in the free world.

However described, it meant trouble. It carried at least one Hemphill. I just hoped Luther was along. The clan patriarch had less need to prove his manhood than did Winston and Zebulon, his twin sons and nephews, a combination of kinship not uncommon among the Hemphills. Then I remembered Zebulon was in the state pen. The last time he'd met a man he didn't like—and there weren't many men the Hemphills did like—Zeb had got carried away and left the fellow dead.

Some local history buff could probably name the precise year the Hemphills settled in their holler and began terrorizing the surrounding small towns. I'd heard that it was well before World War I. It didn't matter. Everyone knew that the Hemphills would steal various items and quite possibly render a few local citizens comatose before they decided to head back to the holler.

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"Hemphill invasion of Riverbend," I radioed.

The sheriff promised to send the two nearest deputies. I hoped the two nearest were the two meanest ones available. I followed the pickup down Main Street, trying to see through the dirty back window and not having a bit of luck.

When it pulled into a slot in front of Jug Mott's bar, I cursed. When I saw Winston get out the right door, the mostly green one, I started praying. Then Luther got out of the red left door and headed into Jug's.

"Lord," I said, "please get them deputies here fast."

I'd taken an oath to keep the peace, and if peace was likely to take a battering anywhere it was Jug's bar when one or more Hemphills entered it. They'd grown up on the stuff they made themselves, so the Hemphills couldn't handle any healthy brew without turning even meaner than normal. Worse, some of the local boys let beer give them excessive courage. Six months earlier, the twins had done about $300 damage to Jug's and left Doc Walter an assortment of cuts to sew up and limbs to set.

The smell of stale beer hit me as I entered the dim bar. I let my eyes adjust—it was sunny and warm outside—while my hand rested close to my .357. Then I located Luther and Winston. They were having a conversation with Jug, who hovered nervously by the cash register while looking like a hound who's just cornered an angry skunk.

Luther took out his wallet, counted out some bills, and said, "I reckon that should cover the damages, Jug."

Jug nodded his head, squeaked out sounds that must have meant yes, and weakly shook Luther's proffered hand. Jug didn't get any stronger when he shook hands with Winston. The Hemphills turned and saw me lounging by the door. I kind of wished I'd picked somewhere else to rest my weight.

"Hello, Deputy," said Luther, coming toward me and leading with his outstretched right hand.

"Hello," I replied, giving him a firm shake.

"I've got good news," he told me. "I've been born again."

"Glad to hear it."

"I've found Jesus. The Lord has shown me the evil of my former ways. I and mine are in town to make restitution for all the wickedness we done."

If that was the truth, they had a long afternoon in front of them.

"Yeah, Luther," I said, "I reckon that's real good news."

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"Don't think I ever done you no harm, Deputy, but if I did, I apologize."

"All you ever did was help keep me in a job, Luther."

He laughed. I had to lean aside to miss the spray of masticated Red Man.

"What about Zelda?" he asked me.

"High school was a long time ago. I don't hold grudges."

"Good," he said. "Winston, this here is one deputy who's always treated me and mine fair. Shake his hand."

I hadn't minded shaking hands with Luther. For a Hemphill, he was as honorable as they come. If he held out his hand, he meant it. Winston was a mean one. When a man shook his hand, that man had to worry about what Winston was doing with his other hand and both feet. Still, the courtesies came off properly.

When I went back outside, I could see through the pickup's windshield. Zelda and Mattie were sitting inside. Zelda and I didn't let on like we noticed one another. Mattie gave me a smile. She might have been eighteen. Scrub her up good, fix her teeth and hair, put her in an expensive dress, and give her a professional makeup job, you'd still have a holler girl who looked ready for any kind of man trouble that came along. Looks were the truth in Mattie's case.

I headed for our small substation and tried not to think about Zelda as I waited for reinforcements. I failed. A little over twenty years before, she and I had been high-school sweethearts. I came from a respectable holler, which put me somewhere below the town or flatland farm folks, somewhere above a Hemphill. For her, it would have been a great match, a way out of the Hemphill cycle of incest, crime, and other antisocial activities.

Luther, her older brother, killed our romance. He claimed Zelda as his woman. No one was about to interfere. Hemphills didn't ask church or state for permission to marry. They just staked out the territory and started breeding. In reality, Luther had done me a favor. A man with Hemphill in-laws couldn't have become a deputy. And if I hadn't been a deputy, I might have lived as outlaw as the Hemphills. I never intended to die trying to farm rocky land the way my father had.

"Hemphill invasion?" Yeager asked, charging into the small building we used as area headquarters.

"A different kind," I told him.

I was glad to see Yeager. He had the strength and brains of a

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small bull. His theory on the best way to break up a fight began with breaking up the combatants.

"We got a Hemphill invasion?" Earl wanted to know as he came through the door.

I didn't let on that I wasn't glad to see Earl. He could fight his weight in wildcats to a draw, but he didn't have much weight on him. I led both deputies to a private collection of blackjacks, brass knuckles, and other unsporting tools of the trade. "Help yourselves, boys," I said. "Luther says he's been born again, but I'm not sure he's ready to handle temptation."

The phone rang. It was John Melton, a grocer. "Deputy," he said, "Luther Hemphill and a couple of his females just came in and insisted that I take two hundred to cover what they've shoplifted over the years."

"Did you?"

"Sure. I told him it seemed a little much. The women said they'd always reckoned I was blind."

The next report came from a garage owner. Luther and Winston had needed quite a bit of time to figure out exactly how many parts they'd stolen over the years. He'd given them a discount for buying in bulk.

"Auto parts?" Earl asked.

"Did you ever notice the Hemphill pickup?" I shot back.

"Ugly-looking, ain't it?"

"Only the rust is original. If Luther and his boys really want to go straight, they're the best shade-tree mechanics I've ever seen. They can work on my car the day I'm sure they won't steal it."

Mrs. Black checked in. Close to eighty, she still opened what she and the other oldtimers called her dry-good store six days a week. Zelda and Mattie had given her $150 for various bits of cloth and off-the-rack clothing lifted over the years.

"Where are they getting the money?" Yeager wanted to know.

I'd been thinking about that myself. I went to my miscellaneous file, which was where I put reports from other jurisdictions when I didn't figure those reports had anything to do with us. I found one from up by Springfield. Two men, one young, one older, both described as ugly, dirty, and the approximate size of King Kong, had knocked over an adult bookstore. They'd not only cleaned the clerk out of a few thousand in receipts but had also taken an undisclosed amount of cash from gays who used the place for a rendezvous. They had escaped in a pickup described as dirty, five different colors, and

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fast. I hadn't originally connected the Hemphills with the holdup, since it had occurred so far from their normal territory.

"The truck fits," Yeager said. "What are we gonna do?"

"Nothing," I said. "This county can use all the cash it can get."

Earl said, "I thought it might be marijuana money."

"So don't think," I advised him.

Like other former bootleggers, the Hemphills had turned to raising marijuana when the market for shine dried up. Most of what they sold went to tourists or fishermen from out of county. If the D.E.A. or the state wanted to come into the county and run a raid, we'd hang back. No sense in getting one of our boys shot because city folks like to poison their lungs and brains.

In late afternoon the Hemphills reverted to form. John Melton called again.

He said, "Deputy, the Hemphill pickup just stopped in front of Deane's Photo Studio. Luther, his boy, and Zelda all ran inside. I could hear the noise of something getting broken and a lot of cursing and yelling clear across Main Street. Then they ran out. The boy had the young gal, Mattie, thrown over his shoulder. She was naked. Zelda was carrying her clothes. The boy slammed Mattie into the bed of the pickup and jumped in with her. The other two got in the cab, then they sped out of town, back toward their holler."

"Thanks," I said and hung up. "Let's go, boys. Deane's Photo Studio."

The reception area looked normal enough. It was behind the double curtains shielding the studio proper that we found the debris of a small, obviously one-sided war. A shattered 5×7 camera and a tripod lay across the bleeding, unconscious form of Deane, owner and sole employee of the photo studio. Two broken floodlights littered the carpet. A pair of overhead lights shone directly down on a metal stool.

"Want me to put out a bulletin?" Yeager asked me.

"No rush. Earl, check out Deane. Yeager, let's look around and see what caused this."

The cause lay on a sofa—a set of manila folders, each containing photos of a different young girl. I'd heard rumors about Deane, an outsider who'd set up business about three years earlier, but a deputy can't act on rumors. I recognized several girls as high-school students. These weren't graduation or yearbook photos.

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"Will you look at this stuff?" Yeager said.
"I am looking," I told him.
"Deane ain't in good shape," Earl reported.
"Even if he is, he isn't. Get Doc Walter."
"Doc might not be sober this late in the day."
"He's sober enough to deal with nasty boys," I said.

When Doc Walter entered the studio I could smell the bourbon before he exhaled. He knelt by Deane and started checking pulse, blood-flow from wounds, contusions, and other vital signs. Earl looked through the photos.

"That's my baby sister!" he yelled.

I got his wrist just in time to ruin his aim. Yeager grabbed the smaller deputy as I confiscated the gun. Doc looked up from where he was working on Deane. "If you boys are going to shoot him," he said, "why don't you do it before I waste a lot of time patching him up?"

"No one's gonna shoot him," I said.

"I am," Earl objected, tossing in a couple of days' worth of profanity.

"No you aren't," I told him, explaining that we'd go through the files and remove his baby sister's pictures before we turned the evidence over to the D.A. "Doc, is Deane likely to live?"

"Yeah, but he needs to go to a hospital."

We had executed the search warrant and were back at the substation going through the evidence when one of the deputies told me I had a call from a man who wouldn't identify himself.

"This being born again is tougher work than I thought," Luther told me.

"You're doing all right, Luther."

"Want me and Winston to come turn ourselves in?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want trouble for not arresting you."

"Why wouldn't you arrest us, Deputy?"

"You did us a big favor, Luther. You've solved more crimes in one day than I have in the last six months."

"And committed a new one," he reminded me. "The preacher who brought me to Jesus said I wouldn't be born again if I went around beating people up. And he said that if I'm really born again, when

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I *do* do something wrong I'll own up to it and take what's coming to me."

That gave me my solution. "Luther, you talk to your preacher. Tell him exactly what happened today. Tell him you called me. I'm pretty sure he's going to be real proud of you."

"If you say so, Deputy."

The other deputies saw it as a fair trade—forget assault-and-battery charges in exchange for what we had against Deane. I didn't bother to educate them about the better reasons for not arresting Luther, Zelda, and Winston. They were too busy making comments about local underage pulchritude to realize they were staring at a considerable collection of future votes.

The sheriff and district attorney would count those votes as closely as the boys were currently counting freckles. Then they'd add in parental votes. The sheriff would work out a pretty little speech to deliver along with each folder. And the photographer would get a chance to leave town quickly and quietly.

Besides, there was no sense in building up the Hemphills as heroes. If ever a clan had been born to backslide, they were it. And now that Luther had been born again, he had a place to start backsliding from.

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a *NEW* short story by

JERRY FIELDS

Forty-two-year-old Jerry Fields has "had" writing, "like the disease it is," for thirty years. He "knocked around Europe for a dozen years as soldier, Department of the Army civilian, and 'civilian' civilian, most of the time in Heidelberg, Germany." In addition to writing straight news, features, and fiction for English-language publications in Europe, he had a humor column, "Unleavened Bred," in an English-language TV guide published for American servicemen and their families. He has lived the last ten years in Baltimore, where he wrote a weekly humor column, "An Unfinished Life," for City Paper *and also had a column in a short-lived women's monthly,* Tres Chic.

With two humor columns to his credit, the smoothness of the following tale will delight but not surprise . . .

CAUGHT NAPPIN'

by JERRY FIELDS

Sleepin' gets people all riled up at you.

You think I'm kiddin'? Well, I'm not. Seems like just closin' your eyes gets people all uppity 'cause they're awake. Just look at the things they say to you when you get up from your nap. *"Well,* Sleepin' Beauty!" they say. "It's about *time!"* they say. At least that's what my wife and her sister always say when I get up from my nap.

They say bad things about me when I'm takin' my nap, too. They don't know I know about that, but I don't always get up as soon as I wake up and I hear 'em talkin' in the livin' room through the bedroom wall.

"Amos just sleeps his life away," my wife said last week.

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"Well, Julia," her sister said, "he's your husband, but if he were *my* husband I'd insist he be out *doing* something. He could be out in the garage cleaning up that messy workbench of his, or out mowing the yard, fine afternoon like this."

She's a meddlin' troublemaker is what she is, but she's "delicate" and can't hold a job and it's for sure no man would want her, so she lives and eats here. And eats and eats and eats. The woman weighs 250 pounds! My wife calls her Baby Sister. Baby's right. She ain't lost her baby fat yet, and if she don't get her way she's a big baby. I call her Baby Huey behind her back.

"Doing something" is some kinda religious experience for Baby Sister, and she's converted my wife. Of course, they get the most excited about it when it's somebody else doing the something. Like me.

I never been on no mailing list in my life 'cause I never sent for nothing. I like gettin' mail, but I don't like to get pictures of pears that cost two dollars apiece from some farmer out in Oregon, or a letter from some guy I never heard of promisin' me I'll get a hundred thousand dollars if I mail a dollar to ten other people I never heard of. Right after I retired, though, I started gettin' all these brochures about startin' a mail-order business right from my own home or makin' thousands in invisible vinyl repair.

It wasn't until I got a call from a guy who told me he was callin' about the interest I'd expressed in operatin' my own import-export business that I finally caught on. I told him I hadn't expressed any interest 'cause I didn't have any, and he said he had the postcard I'd returned right in front of him. Before I hung up on the fool, I asked him if it was filled out in red ink. "Why, yes," he said. That's when I knew it was Baby Sister who was settin' me up for all this stuff—hopin', I guess, to get me started "doing something." Baby Sister always uses red ink, which is real appropriate for a liability.

I expect you've heard people say, "I don't get mad, I just get even." Well, Ole Amos don't get mad, and he don't get even, either. He gets ahead. In about two weeks, Baby Sister started gettin' some mail of her own. I sent her name in to every Miracle Weight Loss ad I could find in the supermarket newspapers. There's always a big stack of 'em lyin' around the house, because Baby Sister gets every one of 'em when she goes out once a week to "help" my wife buy food. She says they have the "real news" about UFOs that the government tries to keep from the people.

Then she started gettin' envelopes marked "Caution: Contains

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Sexually Explicit Material." I was always the one who went out and picked up the mail, and it made my day just to watch her tryin' to arrange some sort of expression on her face when I handed her those envelopes. She'd throw 'em away right off, but when I'd look in the trash the next day they wouldn't be there. Then I ran an ad for her in a Personals column that said she was available to marry aliens. I was kinda hopin' she'd get an answer from Mars, but she only got two or three from California.

She knew I was doin' it, of course, but she knew why, too, so she couldn't say anything. I was gonna start havin' stuff sent to Baby Huey at our address, but I thought that'd just be showin' off and, besides, I didn't want to go gettin' my wife all P.O.d.

But, back to my nappin'. "A person needs less sleep as they get older," Baby Huey's always sayin'. "Well, maybe I ain't that old yet, Tubby," I told her once. Naturally, that gets my wife's dander up, me talkin' bad to Baby Sister.

I didn't used to sleep hardly at all. Before I retired, I only slept about four hours a night. If you only sleep four hours a night, you're awake two more months of the year than if you get eight hours. You can check that. I figured it out on a paper sack down at the store one time, back when I was still workin'.

Anyway, I didn't used to sleep hardly at all. But I thought when I retired I was finally gonna be able to get some sweet shuteye. All them years, cussin' in the mornin' that man was the only one a God's creatures that got up before he was slept out. Even invented an infernal machine to make sure he woke up before he was through sleepin'. The only thing that made me get up some of them mornin's was thinkin' that I wouldn't have to do it when I retired—no, sir, I was gonna sleep whenever I wanted and as long as I wanted and I wouldn't have to answer to anybody for it.

I heard 'em plannin' it yesterday just before I got up from my nap. They were just talkin' away 'cause they don't know I can hear 'em. Baby Huey wouldn't have cared anyway.

"He doesn't really need those naps, Julia. I was just reading in the *National Enquirer* that some people just use sleep as a form of escape. He's just using those naps as an excuse not to do anything or talk to anybody."

"You're one hundred percent right, Baby Sister," my wife said. "Soon as he gets in here let's tell him. No more naps!"

"That's what I'd do, Julia. It's for his own good, after all. Make

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him stop escaping and get something done around here." Baby Huey sniffed.

Well, I got up then, got my face washed and all. Then I went into the living room. Huey couldn't wait. "Tell him, Julia," she said. "Don't drag it out."

"Tell me what?" I asked, but of course I knew already from hearin' through the wall.

"Amos Judd—" Julia said. Judd's my last name. That's what we get put on our Christmas cards, Amos and Julia Judd. "You just sleep your life away. Baby Sister and I have decided you aren't going to take any more naps. You're just sleeping your life away and you ought to be out doing something, like retired Ralph Wilson down the street with his paper route and he keeps up his garden so nice. Don't think you're fooling us—we know about how you use sleep as an escape from the *National Enquirer!*"

Baby Sister sat there noddin' her head and makin' little agreement noises, lookin' at me in her terrible self-righteous uselessness.

"At least you can help get dinner on the table," my wife said. "Go on out to the garage and get a package of those green beans out of the freezer."

"Yes, Amos," Baby Sister said, "and bring in a half gallon of that chocolate ice cream, too."

Well, I saw it then. I wasn't happy about it. I loved my wife. But I saw right then that if it was gonna be one, it had to be both.

The police were very sympathetic, but they were mystified. They found the car in the supermarket lot where I left it before I took the bus back. The nearest they could figure, they said, someone—some druggie or mad rapist or somethin'—must have abducted 'em. The case would remain open, they said, but they were sorry, they didn't hold out much hope.

Last week I mowed the lawn at last light, 'cause that's when I got up. Day before yesterday I washed the car at first light, 'cause that's when I got up. I cleaned up the garage workbench at three this mornin', 'cause that's when I got up.

While I was out there, I lifted up the lid on the freezer and whispered, "You two are just sleepin' your lives away." I always get a good laugh outa that.

I can't claim anything on those hundred-thousand-dollar policies on 'em till they're declared dead after seven years, but it's amazin' how fast time flies when you can nap the day away.

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a *NEW* short story by

DOUG ALLYN

Indio had not only written a book, Tom told the prisoner's stepsister, it would probably be published within a year. "Your brother has tremendous potential as a writer, Ms. Alvarez. He's the best student I've ever had."

"Indio has a great many talents—" Lia nodded coolly "—any one of which might have landed him where he is even if I hadn't been hurt. He also has admirable qualities, Mr. Devlin, but he's a complicated man. If I were you, I'd be a bit wary where Indio's concerned."

A powerful story from Doug Allyn, whose "A Death in Heaven" in the December 1988 issue has been optioned for the movies and whose novel, The Cheerio Killings, *is due out soon from St. Martin's . . .*

STAR PUPIL

by DOUG ALLYN

"Passion," I said quietly, "is the source of true literary power. Your own feelings, honestly described, can transform the simplest story into prose with tremendous emotional impact. It can give your writing—" I hesitated. Someone was sobbing at the back of the classroom. An oversized Chicano kid, twentyish, clad in faded dungarees like the rest of them, tears streaming down his stubbled cheeks. A new student this term. Martinez? Something like that.

"It can give your work value," I continued, "even before your writing skills develop. If you can express your emotions clearly, you can—" Some of the students in the front row were getting edgy, shifting around to see what the fuss was about. I decided to press

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on, to give the guy a chance to pull himself together rather than embarrass him by halting the class.

"Passion," I began again— It wasn't going to work. Martinez was blubbering openly now, and the other students were grinning and nudging each other, most of them eyeing me in open speculation as to how I'd handle the situation. Jailhouse games. The clock above the door showed twenty minutes left in the period, and since all penal-institution classes must begin and end exactly on time I couldn't even dismiss early. Terrific.

I glanced a wordless plea at Indio Zamora, top dog of the Gusanos, the largest Chicano gang here at WaCoCo, the Wayne County Correctional Facility. Indio met my gaze for a moment, his dark eyes unreadable, then nodded a barely perceptible acknowledgment and glanced at Segundo, his second in command. A look, nothing more. Segundo, a slope-shouldered Neanderthal with his hair tied back in a ratty ponytail, slid out of his seat and shambled to the rear of the room. He bent down, murmured something in Martinez's ear. And the kid stopped crying. Instantly.

Segundo eased down beside him at the rear table and rested a blunt-fingered paw on Martinez's shoulder—for comfort or as a threat, I couldn't tell. But Martinez stayed stone-silent through the rest of my lecture.

In the six-odd months I'd been teaching creative writing at the prison, I'd seen this kind of thing before—a whisper here, a look there as effective as the crack of a whip. Detroit's street gangs are active in WaCoCo, and a boss con like Indio Zamora can have the power of life and death over other inmates. Still, as a writer, I've often wondered exactly what the men *say* at such times. Is the force in the message? Or the messenger?

The discussion period at the end of class was the usual stew of abysmal ignorance and surprisingly sharp insights. When I took this job, I frankly expected to be teaching illiterate semi-morons, but though most of the cons are language-deficient and ill-educated, I'd guess the I.Q. levels in my prison class aren't much lower than the Detroit City College classes I teach the rest of the week. And a few of my student convicts, like Indio Zamora, or Ahmad Clark, enforcer for the Black Pharaohs, are intimidatingly bright, with a shrewd, feral intelligence probably superior to the best of my college students.

"Mr. Zamora," I said as the cons filed out to return to their re-

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spective cellblocks under the unblinking eyes of the corridor surveillance cameras, "can you spare a minute?"

"Sure," Indio said, "or ten years." Segundo hesitated as well, but, at Indio's nod, went out with the others. I wondered if the two men ever spoke at all, or if they simply communicated by some sort of wolf-pack ESP. Zamora sat on the edge of the front table, dark, hawk-faced, slender as a leather riding crop, his prison denims neatly pressed and tailored, a perfect fit.

"Thanks for helping out with Martinez," I said.

"No charge, Mr. Devlin," Indio shrugged. "He's one of my people and he shouldn't be cryin' in public. Bad for my image."

"Still, I appreciate it. Pity you can't help maintain order in my college classes."

"Maybe I will," he said, straightening, "sometime in the next century. That it?"

"No, that's not it," I said, annoyed. "Aren't you even curious about what my agent thought of your novel?"

"I figure if he said anything interesting, you'd let me know."

"He liked it as much as I do. In fact, he's already submitted it to a major publisher."

"And that's good?"

"Good? It's terrific. I wish he was half as enthusiastic about my work. He said to tell you your book has more commercial potential than anything he's handled in years."

"Sounds krush." Indio straightened. "So. How long will it take for anything to happen?"

"I can't be sure, but, as fired up as Rudolph was, possibly a month or so."

"Or longer?"

"Maybe longer," I admitted. "But the point is, Rudolph Herzel likes your work and he's not an easy man to impress. Damn it, Indio, you just don't realize what this means. For me to say you're talented is one thing, but for Rudolph to say so, and to give your book a special push, is quite another. It means that you can really write, that you can make a life for yourself after you get out of here."

"Or it might mean you two dudes have similar taste and the book does nothing. Look, Mr. Devlin, I know you mean well, but hope's a risky idea to buy into in the joint. You walk around with your head in the clouds, you can do a brodie down a sewer. So if your agent likes my book, that's cool, but maybe I'll wait till the check clears to start the fiesta, you know?"

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"The book will sell," I said. "I may not be the world's greatest authority, but I know talent when I see it, and you have it. All you've got to worry about is what to write next."

"Wrong," Indio said evenly. "I've got a few other things to worry about, Teach, like stayin' alive and on top of the dungheap until tomorrow, and then the day after that. Be a shame if my book's a bestseller and I'm suckin' dirt in Forest Lawn, no?"

"I suppose so," I said. "Still, maybe late some night, after lights out and lockdown, you might want to think about what your life could be like as a writer. Because you're going to make it, whether you believe it or not."

"Okay, Mr. Devlin," Indio nodded, with a faint grin—the first one I'd ever seen. "Maybe I'll try thinkin' about it. Just a little, some night after lockdown. I'll see you next Thursday, And, ah, thanks. I won't forget this."

"No charge," I said. "You've earned it."

"Maybe," he said, "*pero*—" He swallowed, then turned and stalked out without a backward glance. But I was almost certain I'd caught a flicker of something in his dark eyes. Hope? I couldn't be sure. But if it was, it made all the headaches of teaching in this hellhole worth it.

I thought about Indio often during the next week, especially while reading the earnestly muddleheaded offerings of my junior college students. A few of them have potential, I suppose, the talent and the command of language necessary to become good writers, but they lack character. They simply haven't seen or done enough to develop original viewpoints. Their tales of puppy love and parental betrayal are as homogeneous as the pop/pap music they listen to. Not totally their fault. A generation ago a few literate role models still walked the earth. Who do these kids have?

And yet Indio Zamora, a young self-educated gangbanger from East Detroit, had, with minimal instruction from me, assembled a savagely honest first novel, a book so good I paid it the ultimate writer's compliment of wishing I'd written it myself.

I didn't really expect to hear more from my agent immediately—the process of selling a book can take months, or even years. Still, the following Thursday afternoon, I called Rudolph's office.

"Dev, good to hear from you," Herzel's honey-thick Georgian accent rumbled over the line. "Great minds must run in the same rut. I wrote to you today."

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"Wrote to me?"

"About that student of yours, Zamora? Dee Grossman at Burke Edwards called me this morning, said she'd read the book at a single sitting, couldn't put it down. She's submitting it to the board on Wednesday, we should receive an offer by the end of the month."

"It's as good as sold and you didn't let me know?"

"I said I just dropped you a note—"

"Couldn't you have called?"

There was a silence on the line. "Yes," Rudolph said, "I suppose I could have, though it's not my usual practice—especially when there's nothing definite."

"It's just that—I think it's more important to Zamora than it would be to someone who's free."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry, Dev, but publishing is a business, and patience is one of its protocols. And if Mr. Zamora hasn't acquired that trait in his present circumstances, I doubt he ever will. How's *your* new book coming?"

"It, ah, it's coming. Slowly, and not as steadily as I'd like."

"You know I never press, Dev, but it's been a while. Are you sure you're not overextending yourself? With extra teaching, perhaps?"

"I'm all right," I snapped. "I'll work through it."

Despite the guff I'd given Rudolph, I didn't tell Indio the news before class that night. Instead, I glanced at him from time to time as I lectured, hoping to see some hint of anticipation or curiosity. Nothing. If anything, he was even less animated than usual, present in body only. I couldn't understand it. When my first novel was under consideration I hovered around my mailbox like an expectant father, and it irritated me that Indio seemed so disinterested. I was tempted not to tell him at all, to simply wait until he asked, but if we were having a war of nerves, I surrendered, and asked him to stay a moment after class.

"I talked to my agent today," I said. "He expects you're going to get an offer on it soon."

He stared at me blankly. "How soon?"

"I'm not sure—possibly by the end of the month. The point is—"

"It doesn't matter. I won't be here."

"Why not? Where are you going?"

"To hell, probably," he said evenly. "Unless writin' a book balances out the cutting I'm doin' time for."

"What are you talking about?"

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"About hope, and how it can mess up your head in the joint. Remember what you said last week about doing some thinking after lights out? About how selling the book could maybe make a difference in my life? Well, I did think about it, and I decided you were right. And I took a shot at changing things." He hesitated, glancing uneasily at the open door, walked over, checked the corridor, then closed the door and leaned back against it. "Look at me," he said. "How much do you figure I weigh?"

"Weigh? I don't see what—"

"I weigh one seventy soakin' wet," he said. "You know what that means? It means I'm not big enough to survive in here on my own. If I'm not ganged up, I'm fresh meat for the first psycho with the hots for me."

"I still don't—"

"I'm alive because I'm a Gusano," he continued, raising his fist, showing me the worm tattoo that writhed up his right forearm from wrist to bicep. "And I'm not just some gangbanger—I'm a top dog, a boss. Not because I'm tough. Plenty of guys under me could break me in half. Segundo for one. But I'm smarter than they are, and they know it. So they follow me. And they trust me. And I hear things. Not just Gusano business, all kinds of things. I could write a book," he said drily. "Anyway, I figured that maybe I could do just that to buy my way out. You remember a couple of months back two Feds from the Organized Crime Task Force hauled me outa class for a talk?"

I nodded. "I remember. A short conversation, as I recall."

"Had to be. Bein' around those guys is dangerous. People wonder if you're rollin' over for 'em. Thing is, they offered me a deal—give 'em enough information about the gangs and I could walk. They'd get my sentence reduced to time served if I cooperated."

"And you didn't take it?"

"No," he said. "I couldn't see givin' 'em anybody when we'd all be back on the same streets eventually. My life wouldn't be worth spit. Better to just stand up and do my time, you know? Only now I got a chance for somethin' better than bein' just another chump. So I dropped a dime to the Feds, see if the offer was still open."

"And is it?"

"Sure. The deal is, I talk, they'll fake some scam to take me outa the general population and park me in isolation while they follow up what I give 'em. If it checks out, I can be on the street in a couple of months."

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"But there's a catch?"

"Sort of. There's this guard, Magruder. You know him?"

"I've seen him. Tall? Brushcut?"

"And crooked enough to screw into the ground. He wants a payoff. Five grand. Or he puts the word out about what's goin' down. And I'm a dead man."

"Can't you ask for protection?"

"No way. Even if the Feds believe me, they can't keep me alive. I'd get torched in my cell or maybe poisoned. The gangbangers'd get to me somehow. Which brings me to you."

"I thought it might," I said cautiously. "Only I didn't just get off the boat, Indio, I've been working here a while and I've seen a few jailhouse games."

"You don't believe me?"

"It doesn't matter whether I do or not. Between my child support and car payments, I'm—"

"You didn't answer my question. Do you believe me or not?"

"I honestly don't know," I said, "but if I had any extra money do you think I'd be teaching in this place?"

Indio stared at me, frankly reading me, then shrugged. "Look at these," he said, tossing a pair of photographs on my desk.

I picked up the photos and felt a knot harden in the pit of my stomach. They were snapshots of my ex-wife and seven-year-old daughter, taken at the playground of my daughter's school. "You son of a bitch," I said softly.

"You don't understand. Look at them. When were they taken?"

I examined the photos more carefully. From the light and the clothes they were wearing— "Last fall, I suppose. September sometime. So?"

"September fourteenth," he said, "a few days after you started teaching this class. Do you know how big the Gusanos are, how many men? Maybe three hundred, maybe more. And I'm El Hombre, the main man in here. I have power. Real power. And I didn't get it by missing bets. I started looking for a handle on you the first day we met. I've had these pictures for months. I could've used 'em to pressure you anytime. But I didn't."

"Until now."

"I'm not using them now. I'm giving them to you. And putting my life in your hands. If Segundo or the others find out I'm dealing with the Feds, I won't live a week. Help me, Mr. Devlin."

"Even if I wanted to help, I don't have five—"

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"Jesus, I'm not askin' you for money, Teach, I've got the damn cash! But I need to get it to Magruder, and he won't take his payoff from anybody but me. No corroborating witnesses that way. I can't use my own people to bring it in without making them wonder why I need it. You're my only chance."

"But even if I helped, you're searched before you go back to your cellblock, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I go to work first, in the library. I can stash it there until I hook up with Magruder. Just bring it to me, is that too much to ask?"

"It wouldn't be if I believed you."

"You've read my book, Mr. Devlin, you've seen *mi corazon*—my heart. If you don't know me now, there's nothing more I can say. No hard feelin's. Maybe I'll see you around."

"Indio," I called after him. He paused in the doorway. "Look—" I swallowed hard. "What would I have to do?"

The Wayne County Legal Aid Cooperative Office was nowhere near as grand as its name. A one-story storefront with raw, graffiti-streaked plywood panels for windows on the wrong side of Montcalm Avenue, downhill Motown. The waiting room was jammed, its mismatched vinyl sofas filled with black and Hispanic street people, the air thick with the aroma of damp clothing, cigarette smoke, despair. I told the black matron at the front desk I had an appointment with Lia Alvarez and she thumbed me toward an office at the rear. I wandered down the narrow corridor, feeling pinpricks of resentment between my shoulderblades. Whitey gets waved on through. And what else is new?

Lia Alvarez glanced up at me over the rims of her half-framed reading glasses with eyes that were strikingly dark and intelligent. She was small, a pert raven in a conservative business suit. Olive skin, tightly curled, gleaming hair—not conventional cover-girl material, I suppose, and yet I found her oddly magnetic, almost familiar, though I was sure we'd never met.

"Can I help you?" she asked. Even her voice seemed familiar—husky, velvet, like Bacall's in *Key Largo*.

"I hope so," I said. "One of your clients asked me to see you. Indio Zamora?"

The room temperature chilled at least ten degrees. "Mr. Zamora is not my client," she said. "What is it you want?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "He asked me to see you—"

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"You're Devlin, aren't you?" she frowned. "Thomas Devlin? The writer? *Poets and Promises?*"

"That's right," I said, surprised she recognized me.

"Indio told me he was taking a writing course from you at WaCoCo," she said. "And now you're running errands for him?"

"I'm not an errand boy, exactly," I said. "He's one of my students. I'm trying to help, that's all."

"I see." She eyed me thoughtfully. "Well, far be it from me to impede the educational process, Mr. Devlin. His *or* yours." She took a small envelope from the top desk drawer and pushed it toward me.

"What is this?"

"A key. To a locker at Metro Airport."

"The airport?"

"You seem surprised."

"Well, I guess I thought I'd just see you and—"

"Mr. Devlin, Indio Zamora is my stepbrother. He was my sole support through law school, and since I'm partly to blame for his incarceration I try to—"

And suddenly I realized why she seemed so familiar. There was a slight family resemblance, of course, but it was far more than that. "You're Rena, aren't you?" I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"In Indio's book, the hero has a sister who is—assaulted. He's sent to prison for avenging her. He describes you very accurately—perfectly, in fact."

"I see," she said, meeting my gaze. "Well, I suppose I should be flattered. Or something."

"It seems very odd to meet you like this. It's as though you stepped out of a story. Or a dream."

"If that's a compliment, I'll take it," she said brusquely, "but I assure you I'm quite real. And if you're wondering, the rest of it is true as well."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right," she said. "I've adjusted to what happened, more or less. What Indio did because of it, well, that's much harder. Because he shouldn't be in jail at all. It was a matter for the police, or maybe the Gusanos. Only Indio felt he had to handle it personally. And publicly. For the sake of my honor. Or his. I was never quite clear on that point. He's really written a book? He said he had, but with Indio—" She shrugged.

"He's not only written it, it'll probably be published within a year.

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Your brother has tremendous potential as a writer, Ms. Alvarez. He's the best student I've ever had."

"Indio has a great many talents—" she nodded coolly "—any one of which might have landed him where he is even if I hadn't been hurt. He also has admirable qualities, Mr. Devlin, but he's a complicated man. If I were you, I'd be a bit wary where Indio's concerned."

"And yet you're trying to help him, too," I said, picking up the envelope.

"He's my brother," she said, "he's not yours. And giving you that envelope is the extent of my involvement. Have a nice day, Mr. Devlin." She returned her attention to the papers on her desk, end of interview. I shrugged and turned away.

"Mr. Devlin?" she said as I opened the office door. "I enjoyed *Poets and Promises* very much. It's a wonderful book. When will we see your next?"

"It shouldn't be too much longer," I said. "I've been, ah, having a little trouble, but it should be finished soon."

"I hope so," she said. "I look forward to reading it."

"Thank you," I said. "So do I."

Airport security at Detroit Metropolitan is extremely tight, metal-detectors, guards, the works, which is probably why Indio chose it for a money drop. It's one of the few places in Motown you can carry cash without constantly looking over your shoulder.

The key Lia gave me opened a luggage locker just off the main concourse. It contained a leatherette briefcase with the K-Mart price stickers still on it. I glanced around, but no one was near, so I popped the latches on the case. A moneybelt was folded neatly inside, a cheap, pliable plastic, one-size-fits-all affair about four inches wide, with a velcro hookup and a narrow nylon zipper along half its length. I opened it and rifled through the cash to make sure it was all there, five thousand in old bills. For a moment I wondered where the money'd come from, whether Lia had dropped it off or someone else. A gang member? And it occurred to me that if I had the brains God gave a goose I'd leave the case where it was and walk away.

But somehow I couldn't. And it wasn't just my promise to a student, or that Lia Alvarez was a very interesting lady. It was pride, I suppose, pure and simple. My writing wasn't going well, and if I backed off now, would it be out of caution or because I was jealous

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of Indio's talent? I honestly wasn't sure. I closed the briefcase and took it with me.

Getting into the Wayne County Corrections Facility is almost as difficult as breaking out. There are three separate checkpoints at the employees' entrance to the prison, the first with a metal detector, then two more electronic gates monitored by television cameras. Cofer, the guard at the first checkpoint, seemed to sense immediately that something was wrong. He's a large man, fortyish, grey streaks in his Afro and moustache, and a pillow-sized paunch bulging at his blue uniform belt. We usually talk sports as he checks the contents of my briefcase, but he didn't respond when I asked how the Pistons were doing and he seemed to search my case with unusual thoroughness. He passed me through without comment, but by now I was sweating, and if the first electronic gate hadn't opened as I approached it I might've turned and sprinted for home. The second gate wasn't as easy. I stood facing the camera for roughly a year and a half before the damned relay clicked and the steel door slid open.

It was a lively class—good-natured banter from the students and a short story from a double-lifer that showed real promise. Still, by the end of the second hour the moneybelt around my waist weighed a hundred pounds. Or more.

After class, Indio closed the door behind Segundo, the last of the students to file out. "Mr. Devlin, you look awful." Indio grinned wryly, shaking his head. "You've got no aptitude for crime at all."

"Thanks, I think," I said, stripping the belt from under my shirt and passing it to him. "When you get your first publisher's advance, you owe me a steak dinner."

"I owe you a lot more than that," he said, unzipping the belt and setting the packets of bills out on my desk, "but this'll do for a down payment." He hitched up his blue-denim workshirt and slid the belt around his waist, leaving the money on the desk.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Cash on delivery, Mr. Devlin, one belt, five grand. And one of my people deposited another five in your savings account today. Ten K for one night's work—not bad, no? You'll get another ten thousand next week, and ten more the week after that. Two more belts, that's all I ask, and then you're off the hook."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"About power, Mr. Devlin, about how a guy my size stays alive

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in a place like this. With the cocaine that's sealed in the lining of this belt, I'll be richer than Hank the Deuce. It's worth more than diamonds inside. More than life."

I lunged at him, but he pivoted like a matador, seized my wrist in his left hand and whipped it up between my shoulderblades. He flicked his left wrist and a seven-inch sliver of steel appeared in his palm like magic, an inch from my eyes. "Cool out, Teach—you make a scene and you're the one who'll take the fall, not me. They'll know you brought the junk in. And that you got paid. Cops hate it when straight people go bad, they'll love to bust you. Now you back off slow and sit down, you dig?"

"I don't understand," I said, backing to the edge of the desk. "You could get out of here, you have talent—"

"Be a writer, you mean? Somebody like you? Holdin' two jobs tryna make ends meet? Waitin' like a whipped dog for word from some friggin' editor?"

"Maybe it's not a great life," I conceded bitterly, "but at least I'm not in jail."

"Not yet, anyway—" Indio smiled "—and you better hope you never are. I don't think you got what it takes to make it in the joint. You should have read my book better. 'I am the Invictus Worm, buried by the world, yet I strengthen, feeding, thriving in the pit.' Or maybe you should reread Milton—better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven."

"The man who said that stayed in hell."

"But I won't," Indio said, stuffing his shirttails back in his trousers. "I'll cut a deal to get out, *after* I get some serious cash together, and this setup will do it for me. And you, too, if you think straight. Two more belts, thirty grand in the bank, that's not so bad. More than you got for your last book, right?"

"I won't do it," I said, straightening, trying to pull myself together.

"Yes, you will," he said, sliding the shiv back into his sleeve and opening the door. "I didn't use a plastic belt because it was cheap. I used it because it takes fingerprints real well, and yours are all over this one. If you figure you can explain that away, be my guest, but I hope you don't try. You're an intelligent guy, Mr. Devlin, too smart to risk ending up in here. With guys like me. You'll get the next key in the mail with another five grand on account. I'll see you next week. And don't do anything stupid, okay?"

He ducked out into the corridor and stalked away. And I was so

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furious at the betrayal that I almost shouted for a guard and to hell with the consequences.

But I didn't. Indio had read me well. Either I was too bright, or more likely too cowardly to risk going to prison. So I didn't call out, God help me. I couldn't.

He'd told me the truth. It was all there in his book. Later that night I brewed a pot of coffee, sat down at the kitchen table of my tiny apartment, and reread the original draft of his manuscript from beginning to end, seeing it clear-eyed, minus the glow of discovery. Indio hadn't concealed what he was. He described his life in the gangs on the Cass Corridor without glamorizing it or making excuses for himself. There was no Sociology 101 "victim of a racist society" drivel that most cons rattle off like a mantra. He was a street-smart ghetto delinquent who'd become a successful criminal by dint of his own labor—a dark mirror image of the American Dream. The stark honesty of his account gave it strength and impact. My mistake had been in assuming that his unflinching examination of his life implied a rejection of it, that his intelligence and his talent had transformed him. I'd been conned. By an expert. And by my own need to validate my teaching by discovering a star pupil. And the hell of it was that even after what had happened, I found it difficult to believe I'd been so wrong about him.

I sat at the table for hours after I'd finished the book, sipping black coffee and chain-smoking, though I'd quit years before, trying to think the situation through. Nothing came. I was too drained emotionally, running on empty. Still, I hadn't wasted my time. Rereading his book had convinced me of two things—one, that Indio was an even better writer than I'd first thought, and two, that I was in deep, deep trouble. The man revealed in that book was perfectly capable of destroying me without a qualm.

I thrashed around in my empty bed like a beached trout for what remained of the night, nightmaring, doing hard time in WaCoCo. I gave it up around 5:00 A.M., slipped on my bathrobe, put on the coffee, and paced restlessly around the apartment, looking for an out. I could tell my sorry little tale to the authorities, but even if they believed me I'd probably wind up in jail. Working at WaCoCo had erased my illusions about the criminal-justice system. It's an arcane game for professionals, and Indio knew the moves and the players far better than I did. He could cut a deal to testify against

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me and hit the street while I was still trying to explain my stupidity to a lawyer.

At some point in my wandering, I brushed the curtains aside and glanced out my living-room window at the empty street. Only it wasn't quite empty. A car was cruising slowly past, a teenager's car, black with yellow pinstriping, lowered, fender-skirted, its glass pack mufflers rumbling hollowly in the early-morning stillness.

I stared after it as it disappeared around the corner, trying to remember if I'd seen it before. But somehow I wasn't surprised when ten minutes or so later it crawled past again. And suddenly I was galvanized, enraged. I'd tried to do a decent thing and I'd been betrayed. And maybe there was no way out for me, but, by God, the game wasn't over. Not yet.

First things first. Indio hadn't exactly threatened my family, but he obviously knew where they were. I wanted them out of harm's way while I worked things out. I mulled that over for a few minutes, then called my ex-wife, told her I'd won a non-refundable two-week Hawaiian vacation, and suggested she take our daughter and go, that I'd pick up the tab for everything. It was the first time since our divorce we settled anything without bickering. I thought about going with them, and continuing on to Tahiti or Australia or wherever, but dismissed it. Indio had a belt with cocaine residue in it and my prints on it. He could trade me for a reduced sentence even if I ran.

Still, the idea had its appeal. It was either run or take the payoff and deliver the belts. And who'd be hurt if I did? It wasn't as though he was selling the stuff to school kids, his only customers would be convicts. And he was right about the money. Thirty thousand *was* more than I'd received for my last book.

Books. I kept coming back to that. You've seen my heart, he said. And it was true. But had I seen anything else in his book? Any weakness? Just maybe. After all, Indio wasn't in prison because he was a gangster—he was there because he valued his honor. And because he loved his sister.

I cruised through my morning classes on autopilot, my mind like a gerbil in a jogging drum, ideas tumbling endlessly over each other. And always coming up the same way, with the same image. Lia Alvarez. If there was a way out for me, Indio's feelings for her were the key to it. By noon I'd assembled a crude plan. I didn't like it

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much, but at least it gave me something to do, and an excuse to see Indio's sister again. Or try to.

"Wayne County Legal Aid, Alvarez." Her voice on the phone was curt, all business, and for a moment my heart sank. Suppose she said no?

"Hi, this is Tom Devlin, the writer from Friday afternoon — remember me?"

"Of course, Mr. Devlin," she said coolly, "Indio's teacher and friend. Do you need a lawyer already?"

"Possibly," I admitted, "but that's not why I'm calling. I'm calling about food. Dinner, specifically, at someplace with candles and a view of the city. Does the Sky Room on top of the Renaissance Center sound at all interesting?"

"The Sky Room," she echoed. "My, my, my. Very posh. And very expensive. And what would we talk about? My brother, perhaps?"

"We can talk about anything you like, cats and kings, whatever. Or we can just enjoy the meal and the view. No strings attached."

"Sometimes I think I see Detroit all too clearly from my desk."

"Which proves my point. You need a change in perspective. About sixty stories' worth. What do you say?"

"Are you in trouble?" she asked suddenly.

"No," I lied, "why do you ask?"

"If you don't know already, then maybe I'd better enlighten you," she said brusquely, "and the Sky Room's as good a place as any. Is tonight at eight convenient for you?"

"Tonight?" I said, surprised. "Why, yes, tonight will be fine."

"Somehow I thought it might be," she sighed. "I'll meet you there, eightish. Have a nice day."

She rang off without waiting for a reply. I suppose I should have been offended, but instead my spirits lifted a bit. I was still in a jam, but at least I could look forward to a dinner high above the city with an interesting date. And if things didn't work out, I could always take a header off the roof after dessert.

I canceled my last class, drove over to the Cass Corridor, and prowled through a half dozen pawnshops before I found what I wanted—a duplicate of the plastic moneybelt I'd carried into WaCoCo. Then I stopped by the Renaissance Center, the five-tower, sixty-story complex of shops, restaurants, and offices that rises like a stack of poker chips beside the Detroit River, a half-billion-dollar gamble that the heart of Motown can be revived. A winning bet? It's too early in the game to be sure.

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I took an express elevator from the mezzanine to the top floor, made reservations at the Sky Room for a table with a view of the river, and arranged for a special service the restaurant offers on request. A photographer.

By evening my upbeat mood had faded a bit, partly because if my little charade flopped I'd be out of options and partly because the more I thought about my idea the less I liked it. I wore my best suit and arrived well before eight to claim our table. I made sure the photographer understood her instructions, then took a seat at the bar while I waited for my date. Or my fate. Or both.

The Sky Room has a sensual, sophisticated ambience, embroidered linens, candleglow dancing on silver carafes, the lights of Detroit and the Canadian side of the river stretching away to the horizon as though the Milky Way had whispered down like snow. The waiters were white tux-ed and black tied, but not snobbish. They joked with the diners and each other, typically Motown, where the only class line that counts is the balance in your bank statement.

And then Lia walked in, and the room seemed to brighten. She was wearing a twin of the dress I'd seen a few days before, a plain dun business frock adorned only with a scarlet wisp of a scarf, and yet I felt my breathing catch. She looked absolutely stunning, underdressed for the room perhaps, but, if anything, more attractive for it. She spoke to the maitre d', who escorted her to the table I'd reserved. I wandered over, carrying the small parcel I'd brought with me and wishing to God I was meeting her under other circumstances.

"Hi," I said, parking the package beside my chair as I sat, "I'm glad you could make it."

"So am I," she said. "You look very natty. I thought writers were supposed to be rumpled."

"Ordinarily I am, but this is a special occasion."

"Yes," she mused, scanning the room, "so it would seem. And yet—"

"And yet?"

"Look, Mr. Devlin—"

"Tom," I interjected.

"No, at this point it's still Mr. Devlin and Ms. Alvarez. And that may be as far as it gets. I'll be blunt, Mr. Devlin. The only times I've ever been here were on business. If this is a business dinner,

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fine, but can we deal with the agenda first? It might save you an expensive evening."

"I have no particular agenda other than getting to know you better."

"And that's all? There's nothing in particular you'd like to ask me? About my stepbrother, for instance?"

"I do have one question," I said. "Do you think working on the Corridor's made you just a teensy bit paranoid? Or were you always this way?"

"In this town, paranoia's just another name for reality."

"Maybe so," I admitted, "but everybody needs a break from reality now and again. So let's take one. Now, shall I ask for the wine list?"

"Just one last question," she said. "Why the Sky Room? For a first—date? If that's what this is."

"I think that's the term, yes."

"All right, then—why here?"

"Simple," I said. "I wanted to make sure you'd say yes."

"I see," she said slowly. "Well, true or not, that was the right thing to say. Tom. All right, let's ask for the wine list. Bearing in mind that I'm already impressed, so don't overdo it by choosing something terribly expensive, okay?"

"Ms. Alvarez," I said, "I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

But it seemed more like renewing a friendship than a beginning. She really was familiar, in a way. I had Indio's description of her as background, but it was no more than a sketch, really. He saw her as a sort of streetwise madonna, and she was, but she was also bright and tenacious and compassionate, and funny. And as the evening flew past, I became almost certain that she wasn't involved in Indio's life, except as his sister and his friend. Which made me dislike my scheme even more. Still, I had no choice. And it was almost time.

"Oops, almost forgot," I said, picking up the parcel from the foot of my chair. I placed the moneybelt on the table, then lifted out the small gift-wrapped box and handed it to Lia.

She opened it. "A corsage?" she smiled. "You really take first dates seriously, don't you?"

"Only this one," I said. "Shall I help you put it on?"

"No, I think I'd like to save it, if you wouldn't mind. It's too pretty to wear. And a—moneybelt? Is this some sort of a bribe?"

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"It's just something I picked up for a class," I said. "I forgot it was in the bag."

She knew I was lying. Whether it was her training as a lawyer or because we were simpatico, somehow she sensed it. But she would have let it pass, I think, except that the photographer chose that moment to take her shot. Lia glanced up, startled by the flash, then read my eyes and my soul like a cheap novel.

"Just part of the service," I said lamely. "A picture to—"

"Is it?" she said, cutting me off, her gaze still locked on mine. I looked away.

"What's going on here?" she asked.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind," she said, rising. "Whatever it is, I wish you'd told me. It's been a lovely evening—Mr. Devlin. Thank you. This should cover my half of it." She fished two twenties out of her purse, tossed them on the table, then walked away, moving hastily through the crowd.

"Lia, wait a minute—"

"Here's your photograph, sir," the camera girl said, blocking my path. "It came out perfectly."

"Right, I'll be right back," I said, trying to brush past her as Lia disappeared into the corridor.

"Sir," the girl said, grasping my elbow gently, "didn't you say something about a tip? Fifty, wasn't it?"

It was too late, anyway. Lia was already gone. "Yes," I sighed, taking out my wallet. "Fifty, exactly." The girl handed me the Polaroid snap. She was right, it had turned out very well. And maybe I was off the hook. Instead of delivering the drugs, all I had to do was show Indio the picture of Lia with the moneybelt, tell him that her prints were on it, and that he couldn't burn me without destroying her as well. And he'd never do that. Stalemate. I was free of him.

I should have felt relieved, liberated. But I didn't. Maybe it was the damned snapshot, the glow in Lia's eyes as she held the orchid just as the flashbulb fired.

I called Lia's office the next morning, got put on hold by her receptionist, and, as I waited, realized I had no idea of what to say, anyway. The truth? More lies? I wasn't sure which would be worse, so I hung up before she came on the line. I thought of her often over the next few days and found myself taking out the photograph at

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odd moments and staring at it as though it held a message for me. And perhaps it did.

On Tuesday morning, after my ten o'clock class, there was an envelope waiting on the desk in my office. No postage, no return address, just my name on it. I asked the office girl if she'd seen who dropped it off, but she hadn't noticed anyone, and I wasn't surprised.

I closed the office door, sat down at my battered desk, and opened the envelope. Five thousand in cash and an airport locker key. I placed the envelope and Lia's photograph side by side. Did they balance out? Almost certainly. The photograph would neutralize Indio's hold on me. There was only one flaw in my little scheme. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. I took a last, wistful look at the photograph, then tore it up and dropped the pieces in the wastebasket. Indio was right. I had no talent for this kind of thing. I was back to my original options—take my chances with the authorities, which almost certainly meant going to jail, or make another delivery. I was still staring at Indio's envelope when the warning bell sounded for the next class period. I slipped the envelope into my briefcase and walked out of my office. And into The Dream.

Every teacher has a personal version of The Dream—a vivid, recurring nightmare that shows up when you're under pressure. You're wandering through a strange school, knowing you're late for class, but can't find your room; or you're lecturing and suddenly realize you're only wearing underwear. Or less.

In my version of the dream, I was addressing a class later that afternoon when I noticed the students seemed to be eyeing me strangely. And I realized I had no idea what I'd been talking about, or even which class this was. Western Civ? American Lit 202? My memory was a blank. Erased. And for a moment the spell of The Dream was so strong that I half expected to wake up in bed. But I didn't. Instead I stood there like an idiot for a century or so, trying to remember where I was, and then just said, "Class dismissed," picked up my case, and walked out.

I drifted down the empty corridor like my own ghost, ducked into the first empty classroom I came to, and collapsed into a desk at the rear. Sanctuary, a quiet place to think. *Think.*

I ran the situation over and over again in my mind, staring blindly up at the empty chalkboard, waiting for an answer to materialize. But nothing came. And after a while, Charlie Volk waddled in, a balding, three-hundred-pound Magoo in a stained white lab coat. He began assembling some sort of apparatus on his desk, humming

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contentedly to himself, then stopped as he noticed me at the back of the room.

"Hello, Devlin, what are you doing in here?"

"Nothing, Charlie. Just needed a place to hide. I'll get out of your way."

"No rush, my next class isn't for twenty minutes. I came in early to set up an experiment. How's the scribbling going? Still working on the great American novel?"

"When I find time," I said.

"Well, anytime you need a chemistry teacher for a hero, you know who to ask. It'd be nice to have somebody besides Disney write about us."

"Disney?"

"Walt Disney. Or whoever it was that made up that nonsense for the movies. You know, *The Absent-Minded Professor, Son of Flubber*, all that drivel."

"Oh, that Disney. Sorry, I didn't make the connection."

"You know, you look a little like an absent-minded professor yourself, Dev. Something on your mind?"

"A small problem. Nothing I can't work out," I said, rising stiffly from the desk.

"With one of your stories, you mean?"

"A story?" I echoed. "Yes, I suppose it is in a way."

"Well? Solving problems is what we teach in here, maybe I can help. What is it?"

I stared at him blankly for a moment, then took a deep, ragged breath. I needed to talk to somebody badly. "It's just a plot I'm working out," I said. "About a teacher who gets himself in a jam."

The next night after class, I delivered the second belt to Indio. He seemed almost disappointed. I think he was looking forward to a confrontation, but I had nothing to say to him. He slipped the belt on under his shirt, eyeing me warily.

"You want to talk about this?" he asked.

"About what?"

"This situation we're into here. I know this can't be easy for you."

"I'm touched by your concern."

"Believe it or not, I do care about you, Devlin. You tried to help me and I haven't forgotten it. Plus I want to make sure you don't do anything stupid now and burn us both. Try thinkin' of this as an educational experience. You've taught me some things, now I'm

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returning the favor and you're gonna come out ahead of the game, wiser and richer both. Might even make you a better writer to know how the other half lives. So enjoy your walk on the wild side, Mr. Devlin. And be cool. You're doin' the smart thing."

"I hope so," I said.

"You are," he said. "Trust me."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Just a figure of speech," he grinned. "I'll see you next week."

But he didn't. Indio was absent the following week. I asked Segundo where his boss was and he said he was in isolation block. There'd been a fire in the library. The guards knew it was arson, but couldn't nail anybody for it, so they punished all six of the cons who worked there—ten days in solitary each.

"Sorry to hear it," I said.

"You got any message you want to get to him?" Segundo asked.

"I thought you said he was in isolation."

"He is. But he's still El Hombre."

"Yes, I suppose he is," I said. "No. No message."

"You have a slight edge over writers on the outside," I said, facing the following Thursday-night class of thugs and felons. "You've seen and done things that most people haven't or you wouldn't be in here. It makes your viewpoint unique, and you can make that work for you." I continued on this tack for a bit, talking about former convicts who'd become respected authors—Eldridge Cleaver, James Ellroy, and others. Inspiration by example, I hoped. The class was edgy, unresponsive. I felt I was living The Dream again, lecturing to a Diego Rivera mural. Indio Zamora was back, sitting at a desk in the rear, silent as a stone idol, Segundo, as usual, at his right hand.

I managed to get through the session, made assignments for the following week, and dismissed them. Segundo ushered the others out into the corridor and took up a station in the hallway just outside the door. Indio unfolded from his seat and sauntered toward me. He looked like a man just out of solitary, hollow-cheeked, his dark eyes sunken, opaque.

"Maybe you think you're off the hook," he said quietly, stopping a foot or so away.

"Almost," I said. "I guessed you'd probably hide the belts in the same place, so they went up in smoke together. As for your money,

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it's in my bank in a savings account. In your name. You can pick it up when you get out. If you ever do."

"And if I told you I still have the first belt?"

"I wouldn't believe you. The guards knew the fire was arson and they turned the library upside down. If the belt was there, they'd have found it. They didn't. It burned. It must have."

"When you're right, you're right," Indio shrugged. "Both belts burned. An expensive fire. How did you do it? Some kind of chemical, right?"

"White phosphorus, and consulfuric acid. The acid ate through the lining, the phosphorus burns as soon as it's exposed to air."

"You're a chemist, too? I'm impressed."

"I'm not a chemist, just did a little basic research."

"And the coke that was in the belt?"

"I flushed it down the toilet where it belongs. By the way, Mr. Herzel called me while you were—away. Your book will be published—the advance will be ten thousand."

"Good, I can use the money. I'm about to change careers. I'm getting out of here, going into the witness-protection program."

"Is there an echo in here? I think I've heard this before."

"Maybe so—" he smiled narrowly "—only this time it's true. I took deposits to deliver merchandise, and then my stash gets torched. And now people figure I was runnin' a scam and burned the library to cover myself. They have no faith in humanity, you know? If I stay here, either some strung-out junkie'll waste me or there'll be a gang war and a lot of my people will get hurt. So I'm cutting a deal to get out, tryin' to trade the Feds enough to earn a walk without betraying any Gusanos. And then maybe I'll take my shot at the straight life."

"You'll do all right if you work at it. You're a bright guy, Indio, probably the best student I've ever had."

"No hard feelings, then?"

"Wrong," I said. "All kinds of hard feelings."

"Whatever," he shrugged. "But for what it's worth, I've worked a lot of hustles in my time, Devlin, but I never had a new blood beat me in a deal before. I guess that makes you my star pupil, no?"

"What it makes us is quits, Indio, dead-even. I don't want to see you again, in here or anywhere else."

"Like the song says, Teach, you can't always get what you want. If I'm really as good a writer as you say, maybe you'll see me around, like it or not."

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"I doubt it. I think you're at home in prison, Indio. Afraid of the outside. I think you'll die in this place. Or one like it."

"Perhaps," he said softly, moving closer to me, his eyes only inches from mine, "but sometime, Devlin, maybe late some night, after lights out and lockdown, you'll think back on this and admit you learned as much from me as I did from you."

"I doubt that very much."

"No, I think you *will*. And you know what else you'll remember? What a rush it is to walk on the wild side. And you'll miss it. Maybe you'll even miss me."

"No," I said, "not a chance in hell."

"Maybe not," he shrugged, turning toward the door. "*Adios*, Teach. Thanks for everything. It's been interesting."

"That it has," I said. "Good luck," I added, surprising myself.

He didn't reply. Segundo opened the door for him, then shambled after him down the corridor. I began erasing my notes from the chalkboard, but paused in mid-swipe, thinking about what Indio said about missing the wild side. And I knew he was wrong. If I'd learned anything from him, it was that some people need the adrenalin highs of that life but I wasn't one of them. Nor is there any chance I'll miss him. He's an amoral sociopath with no more conscience than that worm tattooed on his wrist. WaCoCo, or some other prison, is exactly where he belongs.

Still, wherever he ends up, I hope they give him a typewriter. Because if not, I'll send him one myself. A teacher only gets one star pupil in a lifetime, and inside the walls or out Indio Zamora's going to be a fine writer. And in spite of everything, I can't wait to read his next book.

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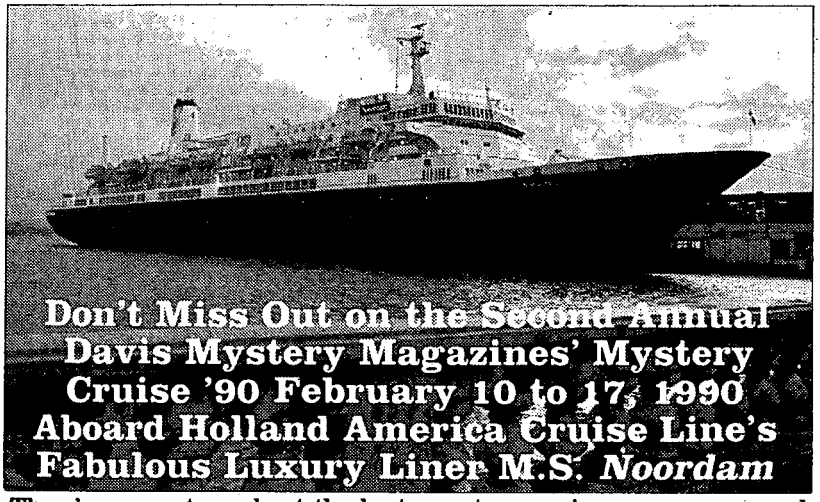

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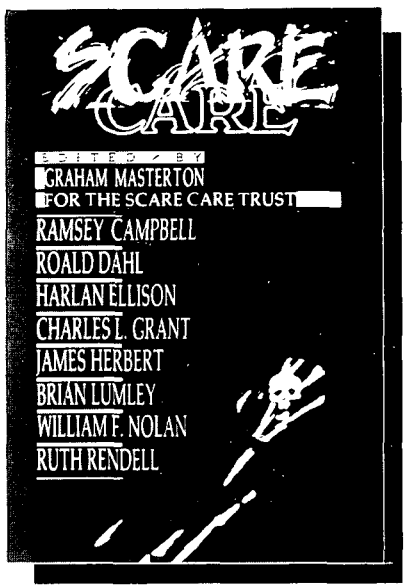

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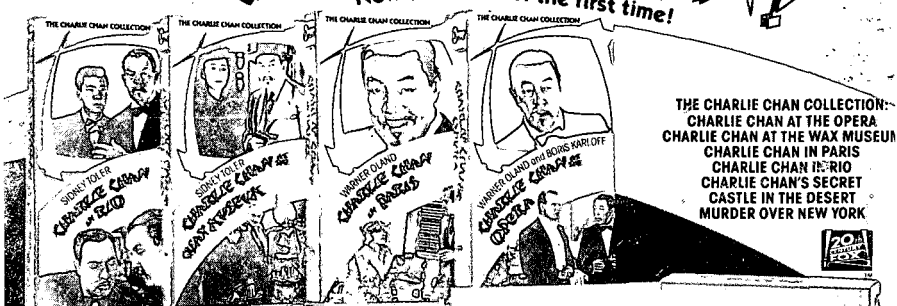

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Forgery, Fraud and Murder!
THE CASE:
Forged bank notes are turning up all over Europe. If even banks out panic will ensue, bank investors will be ruined, and the Lamarche Bank will be destroyed.
THE SUSPECTS:
Max Cordoy: artist
Albert Dubeaux: assistant to the bank's president
Henri Lefebvre: bank officer
Yvette Lamarche: daughter of the bank president
Marcel Lorne: ex-soldier
THE MOTIVES:
• Cordoy wants to reap the financial rewards of fame
• Dubeaux is known to be having financial problems
• Lefebvre has access to confidential bank records
• Yvette is determined to recover her old love letters
• Lorne thinks the bank is cheating him and has threatened to get even
The Clues:
• A list of forged bank bones
• A gun used to commit murder
• Broken bank seal
• Directions to an electrician at a secret neighborhood
• A packet of old love letters
THE QUESTIONS:
• Who has killed Charlie Chan's beautiful assistant?
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